Existential Smut

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Existential Smut

Youthful Indiscretions

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6 Things to Know

1. This anthology consists of erotic stories told between an unnamed male and a female friend named Lisa. The opening story The Deal introduces both people and the overall story frame.
2. At the end of many stories you will see a link to an *Erotic Interlude*. This is where the male narrator and Lisa discuss the previous story. You don't have to read these things, but they are short and fun. Click here to see what one looks like.
3. **Volume 1** of this anthology *(Youthful Indiscretions)* was published in 2023 and **Volume 2** will be published in 2024. (Read a sneak preview here!) If you write erotica stories and wish to submit a story for **Volume 3** or future volumes, visit this website for details.
4. Among the various ways to read a story collection, going from start to finish is among the least logical. That is especially true for short stories and especially for this kind of anthology. Indeed, *the First Time, The Last Time* (included at the end of this volume) is an anthology-within-an-anthology of flash fiction. You could just as easily read it first. (For the curious, here are some alternate sequences for reading these stories).
5. While this project consists primarily of fiction, it also includes an occasional essay (*here* or *here*) and audio versions of the stories (at the same website listed above).
6. The backstory behind the making of this anthology is hilariously complicated (with sordid details here!) Also, having this ebook **blocked (censored)** by the largest ebook store in the world has not been fun .

Proceed. Enjoy.

The Deal

A man and woman talk. They make a deal. The adventure begins.

One day, while sitting in the living room with a girl I vaguely knew, the subject of sex came up. Perhaps I mentioned it first. Occasionally it slipped out in conversation. For one so lavish in his erotic imaginings, I am also adept at skirting the subject in polite company. When should one talk about sex anyway? To talk about it was to admit that sex could be intellectualized, that it was as pedestrian a subject as the national elections or the latest murder on CNN.

Her name was Lisa. We had a common friend, Danny. She was somebody's ex, or something like that. Once upon a time she had had a love life, but now she enjoyed the uncomfortable freedom of being single. She didn't exactly say she wanted another boyfriend, but couldn't help

updating me about the latest guy she'd met. The way she talked was not wistful, but detached and analytical. No doubt she yearned for the companionship of a kiss even if she no longer believed in its magic. For her, passion was a mistake everyone made and recovered from. She wasn't sad, just too ready to accept the hollowness of being unattached.

And as for me? I was Mr. Nice Guy, but no Casanova. I'd forgotten how it feels or even what it means to "fall in love." I had lots of woman friends, and around them there was always a hint of sexual tension – I wouldn't call it attraction – but an acknowledgement that the possibility of romance and even marriage had to be investigated. With women you have to be careful. Both of us had to maintain civil relations while stealthily exploring emotions and physiological reactions. Was the pursuit likely to result in something? Would I be able to stand living with her 24 hours a day? At the moment, I was sitting on Lisa's bed, a thought which would have thrilled me five years ago, but now seemed as ordinary and meaningless as going to the dentist or finding a dollar under the sofa.

"If I were Irene," Lisa said, "I wouldn't put up with Alexander's crap. I don't know what she sees in him. She's such a smart and independent person, but she needs to stop letting him boss her around." Irene was a tall slender woman with a lovely figure – a recurring sexual fantasy for me. As for Alexander, well, he wasn't perfect, but he wasn't the asshole Lisa made him out to be. Maybe I could have defended him, but could I have ever changed her mind?

"Was Irene going to meet us here or at the restaurant?" I asked.

The phone rang, and Lisa stood up. "No, Alexander will meet us over at Mark's house. Hello?"

While Lisa talked on the telephone, she seemed oblivious to the fact that I was a few feet away. She was talking to Bobbie, Mark's wife. Bobbie was nice and funny, but unattractive. I'm sorry to summarize a person in terms of her looks, but that's the way it is. I watched Lisa go over the plans, nodding periodically and twisting her necklace in a carefree, almost childlike manner. A strap from her blouse slid off her shoulder, exposing a small bit of skin underneath. Moments later, she straightened the strap over that shoulder, and that bare bit of skin would never be seen by me again.

When Lisa hung up, she said, "Are you ready?"

"I've been ready."

"Let's go then," she said, grabbing her purse and keys. But as we headed out the door and toward her car, Lisa stopped. "Wait a minute, " she said, turning and walking to her apartment.

"What did you forget?"

"This won't take a sec," she said, opening the door and tossing her purse on a nearby chair. "I forgot to program my DVR to record tonight's episode of *Fast Talk*." Lisa turned on the TV and reached for the remote control. As the picture on the screen started to appear, I could hear women talking on the current TV program.

"So did you know you were speeding at the time?" went the first voice.

"Sure I did," went the second voice, which materialized into the image of a woman in her twenties sitting on stage before an audience. She was short and Hispanic, young and sexy, gleeful and animated. "But I didn't know a policeman was following me. At first, I thought he was after somebody else, but then he put his siren on, and I had no choice but to pull over."

"Richard, what did you think when you first saw Maria?" the interviewer asked. The camera moved to a uniformed man sitting beside her.

"I thought, man, she was a hot babe!" Laughter arose from the audience in the TV studio. "I mean, I saw she was scared and nervous, but she was also smiling and when she looked at me with those eyes, I just couldn't think straight."

"And I was nervous just talking to him," she said, picking up the story. "Absolutely terrified. But when I saw how handsome and friendly he was, I relaxed. And Richard was making jokes, so I didn't worry about the ticket, I just said to myself, wow, this ain't so bad, this is just like my fantasy."

"Wait," the TV host asked. "Are you saying that you have a fantasy about policemen?"

"Oh, yes," she said, laughing. "All the time. I always used to have sexual fantasies about getting stopped by a policeman. Guys in uniform do that to me. It's funny, you know, policeman, military men, firemen —"

"Firemen?" the interviewer exclaimed, and titters came from the audience.

"Okay, let's go," Lisa said, turning off the television.

"Wait!" I said, frantically turning it on again.

"What – are you watching this?" she asked.

"—always nervous and a bit scared," the Mexican woman went on. "And then he asked where I was going and was I in a hurry."

"Yeah, I had to see her." the male guest added. "I already decided not to give her a ticket. Just a warning, but I wanted to talk to her some more."

"So what did he do, Maria?"

"Nothing, he was real polite about it. He said, 'Ma'am, I'm not going to give you a ticket or anything.' He said, 'I don't want you to get offended by

what I'm going to say, because I don't want you to think I'm putting pressure on you. But I really like talking to you, and in an hour I have my break, and if you want, we can meet at a MacDonald's to talk some more."

"And what did you say to him?" the interviewer asked.

"I said, 'sure!'" The woman was smiling, and a few audience members gasped. Underneath the woman's image appeared the caption, "WOMAN FANTASIZES ABOUT SEXY POLICEMAN." Without any embarrassment at all, the woman continued, "I knew from the first moment it was love at first sight."

"I can't believe we're watching this," Lisa said to me.

"Shhh!"

"—met him at MacDonald's, and we talked for a few hours. And three hours later we were driving along –"

"In the police car?"

"Yes, in the police car –" Roars came from the audience. "He was off duty, but he took me to a nearby park, and it was dark and romantic, and then I knew he was the one."

"Would you say the romance progressed quickly?"

The man and woman looked at each other and started laughing. The interviewer started laughing too, and so did the audience. "What's so funny?" the interviewer said.

"We were making whoopee 15 minutes after we got to the park," the man said.

An older overweight woman in the audience stood up and took the microphone away from the host. "I want to say something to the man. You're a disgrace to the police force. You should be fired. I can't believe you used your position to meet women." The audience applauded.

"What do you have to say to that?" the interviewer asked.

"There's nothing to say," the man said. "It was love at first sight. Yeah, maybe I did something wrong by inviting her to MacDonald's. But if I didn't do it, that woman would be gone forever, and we wouldn't be married and sitting on your show right now."

"This is too much," Lisa said to me.

"Maria," the interviewer asked, "if Richard were not a policeman but met you on the street just as an ordinary guy, would you still fall in love with him?"

"Well, no –"

"No?" the husband exclaimed with genuine surprise.

"I mean, yes, sure, I would have fallen in love with him. Of course. But it wouldn't have been the same. Maybe I wouldn't have been attracted to him

from the beginning. When he was a policeman, I was really afraid of him, but when we talked I realized he was the right man for me, the man I'd always dreamed about. But if I just met him on the street, I wouldn't be afraid of him. I'd just think he was some typical guy. Oh, sure, after I talked to him for a while, I probably would have fallen in love with him, but it wouldn't happen as suddenly as it actually did."

"Was it the uniform?"

"Sure," she said.

"Well, Maria, we have a special treat for you," the interviewer announced. "When your husband told us that you liked men in uniform, we prepared a little show for you. I am proud to introduce you to the NBC police squad."

Suddenly, amidst loud dance music, ten handsome men in police uniforms strutted onstage and danced in front of her. Maria stood there clapping while one of the male models dressed as a policeman gyrated his hips and teasingly removed his shirt. The rest of the audience clapped their hands to the beat, and in a flash, the scene changed to a commercial, a child crunching a potato chip, producing a noise so loud that the rest of the students in class went "Shhhh!"

"That's enough, isn't it?" Lisa said, turning the TV off.

"For today anyway," I said, walking out with her.

We drove to Mark's house in Lisa's car. Though the radio station was blaring, both of our minds were thinking about the television show.

"I can't believe that woman," she said. "She must be crazy to talk about her sex life like that on TV."

"I enjoyed it."

"You and millions of other males out there!"

"It's just for fun."

"It's a fantasy," Lisa said.

"We all have them, don't we?"

"Sure," she said, "but not many go on TV talking about them. I'm sure thousands of policemen are watching this show and thinking all women are like that. Do you know how many crazy people watch these shows?"

"Do you know how many normal people do?"

"I'm serious," she said. "What kind of world do we live in where people on TV no longer feel any shame? I'm not for censorship, but what makes people go on TV and talk about all that stuff?"

I didn't know what to say. Lisa was overreacting. I didn't agree at all. Should I indicate my disagreement or just say nothing? Obviously I wouldn't be able to change her opinion. We stared at the road and the cars

whizzing by until finally I spoke up.

"I'll agree for the moment," I said, "that these shows sensationalize and even trivialize human desires. But you are uneasy with the idea of fantasy. Perhaps you feel threatened."

"So do you enjoy these shows?"

"Should I lie and say no? We enjoy sexual and romantic fantasies on TV because people's natural inclination is to conceal them. I would say – "

Lisa turned to me and laughed, "Yes, Dr. Freud?"

"Ok, never mind."

"Please continue," Lisa said.

At first I wasn't going to pursue the issue. But then I thought: the battle of the sexes can only be mediated by honesty. "Here's a question," I started. "If there were an easy and risk-free way to expose your sexual fantasies to millions of people, would you do it?"

She dismissed the question without words.

"Well?"

"What do you think?"

"I would!" I said.

She grimaced. "Somehow that does not surprise me."

"What's wrong with publicizing some of your sexual fantasies once in a while? Nowadays there are multiple ways to record sexual fantasies: Internet diaries, chat rooms, web chats – to say nothing about avatars and virtual worlds."

"How boring … and scary," Lisa said. "Who wants to be subjected to the lurid fantasies of random strangers? Ok, it might be entertaining to know the fantasies of friends, but I'm not so sure I'd even want to know their sexual hang-ups. And have you noticed how certain behavior is exaggerated in a public setting? If everyone displayed their sexual fantasies somewhere, eventually the most extreme and ostentatious examples would attract the most attention. Those with more dangerous fantasies (involving violence or rape for instance) might receive outside encouragement to act them out in real life."

"We're not talking about rape here. The woman on the TV show wasn't a victim."

"But you enjoyed watching it."

"We both enjoyed watching it!"

"I never said fantasy was wrong," she said. "I merely said it's better to keep such things to oneself."

"No," I said with hesitation. "That's not right at all. Fantasies can and should be shared. They can be artistic or entertaining – "

"Or sadistic," she added. "But most people would prefer not to hear or read these things – except perhaps from a lover."

"But then you limit your audience to a single person. No, the ideal audience for a sexual fantasy is an outsider – someone without a stake in the relationship itself. Besides, if I became familiar with the private fantasy life of other women, wouldn't I have an easier time understanding the fantasy life of a future girlfriend?"

She chuckled a bit. "Perhaps you should spend less time reading or composing fantasies and more time looking for somebody to act them out with."

"And if no such partner exists?"

"Well, no offense," Lisa said. "But shouldn't you be the one to rectify that?"

"Isn't it a woman's responsibility to rectify that?" I countered.

I looked at Lisa for a response. "The real question," I continued, "is not my right to have fantasies and share them. The real question is whether you or another person would find them worth hearing or reading."

"Well, if I had to read your kinky sexual fantasies, I suppose I should have the right to criticize them. How would you like that?"

Silence. I didn't know what to make of that statement of hers. Suddenly in a flash I understood. She was making a challenge. Should I take her up? Was it worth it? "Okay," I announced, "you have a deal."

Both of us laughed, and Lisa turned the radio louder.

*****

Reminder: Turn the page to read the next story. Below is an **Interlude** with a short dialogue or commentary about the story you have just finished. Clicking this link is optional. (If you wish to skip it and read the next story, just turn the page.) If you read the interlude, look for another link at the end which will bring you back to your current position in the ebook.

Interlude: Lisa has second thoughts about the deal. The narrator reassures her. Or does he? (**Read more**)

The Porn Star and the Choir Boy

A college student's real-life encounter with a porn star causes his erotic imagination to go wild.

A porn star visited my college campus to participate in a public debate about pornography. Of course, porn isn't easy to discuss in public (though raging hormones ensured the undivided attention from students). The woman was well-spoken and smartly-dressed. She made utterances about subjects not even the most liberal among us would mention in mixed company. The anti-porn sociologist countered her points cogently and politely, but the crowd's sympathies surely rested with the beautiful emissary of lust who twirled sociological arguments as deftly as a stripper waving discarded lingerie in the air.

Such debates quickly turn into shouting matches; and indeed, this debate, like a porn film, was more of a histrionic exhibition than an honest meeting of minds. One side raised the gruesome specter of rape, incest and bestiality; the other portrayed a future society governed by fundamentalist wackos, full of censorship and suppression of liberty. One panelist suggested that her films portrayed sexual coercion as satisfying.

That remark made her indignant. "It's fantasy!" she said. "Obviously it's not extolling rape." To prove her point, she asked every woman who had ever fantasized about being raped to stand up. No one did. The porn star laughed, reminding the audience that forced sex fantasies were common among women. This stunt, though quite irrelevant to the point at hand, had the effect of silencing an audience and turning a crowd of feminists into a bunch of lying hypocrites.

This erotic notion is not about the woman but her trip to the hotel afterwards. University speakers typically are picked up at the airport and driven to campus by student association members. In her case, two male students were her escorts (or that's what they say). One was someone I vaguely knew; a respected honor student who sang in the church choir. I have no idea what really happened, but erotic possibilities fill my mind. The porn star, far from home and looking for a quick thrill, would have viewed the boy as an easy lay. The college student, though honest and respectable, must have felt a secret thrill at being so close to a sexually open woman. Her boredom combined with his curiosity must have ensured a strange and exhilarating tension during the trip to the hotel.

To be fair, there is no reason to think this woman as promiscuous in real life as in the movies. Perhaps to her the thought of a one night stand was as fatiguing as the thought of bringing home extra work. And although the boy sang in the church choir, did he have to be a saint? His weekends could very well be filled with sexual dalliances and partying. Perhaps this woman, who was at least ten years older and already showing signs of age, just didn't seem attractive to him (especially when compared to the girls he dated). All this I know, but why do I continue pairing these two figures erotically in my mind? The imagination – especially the erotic imagination – prefers dealing with types to individuals, prefers making humans reducible to a few elemental drives. I recognize this simplifying and stereotyping tendency, but am unable to resist its allure. The imagination revels in alleged details: the panties over the chair, the playful straddling, the bold invitations, the descending kisses, the tongue's first taste of sex, the nervous laughter, the fumbles, the strokes, the thrusts, the pauses, the smoothness and the hairiness, the face that changes from self-absorption to tranquility in an instant, the limbs that cling long after passion has been spent. In my mind, the porn star and the choir boy keep joining together, each finding the other irresistible.

Lisa asks, "Why write erotica when people are dying in Middle East?" The narrator tries to answer but stumbles. (**Read more**)

Germs

A girl studies abroad in Heidelberg and two college students discover passion at the wrong time.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we just got a weird request. But we're going to do it anyway." (Final line from the film *Baby It's You*)

My friend Milena studied abroad in Germany for her junior year of college.

During that year, many things would happen. I would break my collar bone, fall in love with Natalie Portman and take a cross-country bus trip. I also decided to skip graduate school – for a few years anyway. I never heard from Milena until April, when she announced (via email) that she had fallen in love. That girl! Of course, the same would happen to me several years later (or so I thought). After studying abroad, Milena would

return from Germany as a changed woman. She became more vocal and outgoing, less interested in creativity, more committed to changing the world. She developed a love for environmental politics. She talked about Jonathan (that was his name). Both of them had a master plan. After graduating, she would go to London to be with him (obtaining a master's degree in the process). While I spent senior year goofing off, Milena was hunting down recommendation letters, working on a political campaign and planning her trip to UK. She lived off campus in senior year, so I rarely saw her – sometimes in the class hallways, once even at the campus coffee shop. That year was so busy – not just for her but both of us. After graduation Milena reunited with Jonathan in England. I returned to Chicago. A few years later I heard Milena was in Colorado again (minus her English boyfriend), running around with an ecotourism group. I suppose by now she is happily married, working for next to nothing on some futile campaign to save the world.

That was the future, before I even cared about the past. But when I was 20, all I cared about was the present. Milena had called to say she would be spending a night in Chicago (where I lived) before her big trip to Germany. I met her at the airport, glad to see her before she left. We went to Rice University in Houston. We agreed it was a crappy school, but she had a scholarship, and I foolishly thought I would study mechanical engineering. By the end of sophomore year, we realized the futility of transferring schools. We already made friends and completed two years of prerequisites. We even enjoyed the football games. Besides, when Milena learned that overseas courses counted towards her major, she resolved to make the best of a bad decision. As she explained, "there's no point in dwelling on what we should have done two years ago."

When I tried to hug her at the airport, she brushed me away. "Don't. I have a cold." Yes, she was sniffling. But she didn't look awful; she never did. Did I mention she was beautiful? She had slender arms and a quiet delicate grace. In large groups she was quiet and perfectly content with herself. But all alone she was an entirely different person – unafraid to say bizarre, unexpected things and laugh scurrilously at anything that mocked convention. She was still a girl, still a little girl. Or maybe not, but she liked pretending to be. Sometimes it was hard to tell if her modesty was authentic or just a pose to amuse her closest friends. And yet I loved this about her: it was charming; I loved it very much. She had loads of friends, boyfriends even. Although she was reserved around most people, I could say with pride that around me she was less reserved, more willing to joke. In freshman year we worked on the school newspaper and spent many a

night in the *Thresher* office doing last minute editing or layout. One evening, on a lark, Milena and I took a walk around campus, eventually sitting at the topmost bleacher of a deserted stadium. The wind was blowing in our faces, and silence enveloped us as we stared at the distant city lights. That was the time, I thought. Do it. There will never be a better time. Do it! The urge to plant a kiss on her lips shuddered throughout me. The night was quiet, and we sat, doing nothing, making the occasional comment about nothing in particular. But as much as I wanted to, I didn't. It didn't feel right. Milena was preoccupied by the night silence and trivialities of conversation. Besides, we were at peace. To kiss her, to try to kiss her would break the serenity captivating us, and bring us back to the mundane. A kiss would be a challenge, an opening salvo to an argument. I didn't want to challenge; I just wanted to be. Also, I was afraid. It wasn't the way I dreamt it would be; there wasn't that magical tingly feeling of mutual adoration, only the sharp lonely pang of passion and need.

At the Chicago airport Milena had three heavy bags which we dragged over to the hotel shuttle. I lived an hour away in the suburbs and offered to show her the town that last night. After dropping her things at the hotel, Milena took a quick shower while I played around with the television. I heard the water running, and the thought occurred to me that she was in there naked, no more than ten feet away, her body enveloped in a warm and gentle rain. It was a daily ritual for her, but also the only time of day when she remembered her body and physical sensations, a body I had imagined and recalled imagining many many times. She took a few minutes to dry her hair, and when the door finally opened, she stepped out of the steamy fog, bright, shiny, smelling of shampoo and fresh clothes. "Well," she said, "are you ready?"

At the restaurant, while listening to the jazz band and waiting for dinner, we talked about odds and ends; she told me how she planned to meet a friend in Baden-Baden in four days and how her future roommate in Heidelberg had already emailed her (in German!), inviting Milena to her family cottage along the Rhine. She talked about a prison for students next to the University of Heidelberg and how she would surely send me a postcard or photo of her inside one of the cells. Although I didn't say it, I felt jealous. While Milena was off on her travel adventures, I would be spending the next year stuck in Houston, a place that was not the film capital of the world. But Europe would never leave or disappear; it would always be there for me. I had a lifetime to visit it, even perhaps Heidelberg. Perhaps some day I could be at that same prison, sending photos to some lovely faraway person.

Milena reached into her purse and pulled out her passport, but when she tried to show it to me, she sneezed all over it. We both laughed.

"Sorry," she said, wiping off the phlegm with one of her many kleenexes. "Gosh, I hate traveling with a cold. I'm sorry I couldn't be healthier."

"Do you want to return to the hotel?" I said.

"No, I'll be ok. I need one last night of fun before leaving American soil."

"Isn't it ironic," I said, "that I'll be the last friend of yours from America to see you. What if some terrorist hijacked your plane to Colombia, and you were never heard from again?"

"Please, think positively."

"Positively? Maybe the hijacker wants to go to Tahiti."

"Or Costa Rica," she said. "I heard that's beautiful."

"I'd book that one. Of course, with my luck, the hijacker would crash the damn thing over the Gulf of Mexico."

"Please," she said, "I'm the one getting on the plane tomorrow, not you. Anyway, you should feel honored to be the last recognizable face I'll see in America."

"I am honored," I laughed, but in fact I was deadly serious.

"Yes," she said, almost with an air of resignation. "It's too bad we never had the opportunity to see more of each other last year. You always were so much fun." She blew her nose discreetly into a kleenex.

"What do you mean? You were the one always busy. Busy with your boyfriend."

"Boyfriend? Ian's been out of the picture for almost a year now."

"Or should I say, 'boyfriends?' Stephen, John and that guy with the beard and wacky T-shirts. What was his name?"

"Those weirdos!" she said dismissively. "They were just guys from history class. Our group went out for drinks after the weekly study group. I'd hardly call them friends."

I feigned a flippant attitude. "Darn, if I had known that, I would have tried to spend more time with you."

Our eyes met for a moment, and then Milena's drifted away. "It's too bad," she said with a sniffle, or maybe a whiff of sadness.

The conversation quickly reverted to something silly – a new movie or song, but all this time I was absorbing what she had said. "It's too bad we never had the opportunity to see more of each other." What did she mean? It's too bad we never had the opportunity. We? Had she wanted something more? This all came out of the blue. Was it possible that even a small portion of the attraction I had felt for her had been requited? A voiceless shudder passed through me. Had I been misreading her for the past two

years? Hardly call them friends? That meant she regarded me as a friend. Just a friend? It's too bad. Those were her words. What was too bad? That we were friends? Was that bad? Why did she say it was too bad? More importantly, why hadn't I noticed her interest before?

Back in freshman year, she became romantically involved with Ian only two weeks after school began, and that continued for more than a year. Actually, I hung around the two of them quite a bit (and even stayed friends with Ian after the breakup). That's irony. A year ago, she and Ian were madly in love and planning to live together. And now neither person wanted to see the other while I remained friends with both, and was the last person Milena would see before leaving the USA. Yes, this was the dreaded "friendship zone." But tonight was different. She was smiling at me differently. Or was I just now noticing it?

As we meandered on some other banal topic, I suddenly blurted out, "do you want to know a secret?"

"What?"

"I've always had a crush on you."

She looked at me with amazement. "Whoa," she said, laughing a little, then leaving an uncomfortable pause. "Tony, you're really full of surprises tonight."

"Yes," I said softly, as it dawned on me that Milena wasn't suddenly going to admit to some grand overwhelming passion.

"Well, gosh, Tony," she said, nodding her head. "Your timing is remarkable." She paused and gave a sad, cynical laugh. She seemed about to say something, but then changed her mind and kept it to herself. "I guess it's futile to talk about such things now."

"I guess I had always been crazy about you," I continued, knowing that once I started I wouldn't be able to stop. This might be my last and only time to talk like this. "When I saw you for the first time reading a book underneath a tree, I wondered how great it would be to know you better. Then you showed up at the newspaper office, and we saw each other almost every day. But you were seeing Ian and after Ian, that other guy – "

"There was NOT another guy."

"Whatever. I viewed you as one of those out-of-reach girls that a person could dream about. I thought you liked me only as a friend. Tell me, was I wrong?"

Milena sighed. Although she paid close attention to my words, she seemed on the verge of a sneeze and closed her eyes. When nothing came, she said, "excuse me."

"No, go ahead."

She sat with her eyes closed, waiting unsuccessfully for a sneeze to come out. When nothing did, she opened her eyes again, and took out a kleenex. "Excuse me."

"Do you need medicine?"

"No, I'm already doped up."

"I guess it's not a good time to be making confessions."

"Don't worry about it," she said in a low voice. "You've been very sweet."

"Was this something you thought about?" Knowing she'd be on that plane tomorrow made it easier to be honest. And easier to face a letdown. Milena hesitated, so I went on nervously. "I had always thought … that I was in love with you."

Milena touched my arm with her hand while trying to avoid contact with any exposed area of skin that might infect me. "You are very sweet," she repeated.

"How did you feel? Could we ever have become more than just friends?"

"Nothing is impossible," she said. "You make it sound as if 'just being friends' is slightly awful."

"No, I didn't mean that." I suddenly realized I had nothing more to say. Milena sat next to me quietly, holding her head back and closing her eyes.

"Are you all right?"

Milena opened her eyes again. "I'm fine. My nose is a faucet, and my throat is pretty sore. But I'll be fine." Milena paused, took a deep breath and continued talking. "It's like this. There was a time when I would have – yes, at the football game – do you remember when the group went to the opening game, and we were talking about kindergarten teachers? And you told the joke about the man with the cellphone? Remember? On that day, I was thinking about how wonderful you were, and how nice it would be to spend the rest of the night talking with you. Do you remember?"

Of course I did. It was a breezy night, and we had walked back to the dorms together after the game. It wasn't a romantic time at all; both of us were just saying silly things. I guess I could have spent all night talking to her, but the game was over, it was getting late, and you didn't have time for drinks. Something about a school assignment you had to finish. The time you were most attracted to me was the time I thought you were trying to get rid of me.

"It's funny how things worked out," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm really sorry. If I had known, maybe I would have – "

"Would have what?"

"Kissed you."

We looked at each other for a few moments, then Milena gave me a happy-go-lucky "c'est la vie" kind of expression. "Oh well," she said.

What a fucking idiot I had been. During freshman and even part of sophomore year I had thought a few times about calling her out of the blue and inviting her to a concert or something. But whenever I imagined the conversation, I would always sound awkwardly desperate, and she would have always have a ready excuse for declining. I never had the courage to hope. And yes, now everything was too late. The airplane would take her away tomorrow, and I would even be the one to escort her.

But that was a pessimist's view of the situation. There was time still. She was with me, and we were together in the restaurant eating pie and drinking coffee, uncertain what to do. There was time. I held her hand in almost a panic, "Let's get out of here," I said, and she agreed.

As we walked to the nearby El stop for the train to the hotel, I suddenly became aware of the night, the fact that we were alone and I was the only one she knew in this gargantuan city. I took her hand and held it while Milena looked at me, slightly alarmed, but never saying a word. "Please," I said, moving closer and kissing her on the lips. It was a little sudden, and she consented without any visible sign of cooperation. Suddenly, she broke away and said, "No, please. I have a cold. You don't know what you're doing. Let me go."

We arrived at the Damen El stop and started waiting.

"I'm sorry," she said. I said nothing. "Listen," she said, "don't take it personally. I'm leaving tomorrow. I can't think about the past or what might have been. I'm sorry. Tony, are you mad at me? I didn't mean to offend you. It's just… I have a cold! If you get it too, I'll feel guilty when I'm on the plane. You're a great friend. Call it love or whatever you want. I like your company and am enjoying this evening quite a bit. "

"I'm not mad, " I said, watching the tracks for the next train. Her eyes were reddened with nasal congestion, and I half-wondered if they might have been tears. It was 10:30. She looked sick as a dog. I felt bad about having told her all this when her physical state made her so miserable. Maybe letting these things come out was a mistake. I put my arms around her and held her, noticing that neither of us was willing to let go. The embrace was not romantic or sexual, just calming; and when she finally let go, she looked at me with a tender smile, as though she saw in my eyes a new possibility, a new hope, a new source of warmth. As the train approached, she said, "On second thought, I don't feel that bad. I probably look worse than I actually feel."

"You look beautiful to me now."

"Liar!" she laughed. "Let's go somewhere. Do you dance?"

"It's your last day in America. We can do anything you want."

She looked out at the city and smiled. "Let's walk around. I'm feeling better."

I didn't know much about Bucktown and or what kind of dance clubs were around. But we walked towards the lights and music, lingering momentarily at shop windows full of vintage clothes and curious jewelry, stopping at the entrance of a club. From the outside we couldn't tell what it would be like, but inside, we realized that it was a techno/industrial place with lots of smoking European types funking it up. Milena led us through the crowd, and we started dancing to a kind of mindless noise I'd never heard before. The music was loud, pounding and completely foreign to me, and Milena smiled as she moved around, imitating the steps of people around us. Half an hour later, Milena yelled in my ear, "Maybe there's another club with decent music?"

We went down the street to a club playing country rock and blues. Milena was frantically trying to dance along, and I tried keeping up, laughing at the silliness of it. Thank god nobody we knew could see us. During the slow songs, we held each other close; I could feel the sweat of her arms and face, and still I kissed her, twirling around, struck by the moment and the lights and the fact we were together, close friends among strangers, acting the parts of people in love. And we were in love. For the moment anyway, a moment I was carefully preserving for memory.

For the rest of the night, our hands were always together. From the time we returned to her hotel, we were kissing. Never mind the sniffles or sneezes or germs. Never mind! By this time, Milena had given up saying no. We continued talking – whispering – and laughing at secret silly things that mattered only on this special night. We were on her bed, all over one another. My hand underneath her breast, caressing, pleasing her. It was calmness and the urgent need to uncover everything, to trace intimate circles of desire around her sighing female world. I slipped my hand over her underwear and brushed it lightly, waiting a few moments for her skin to accustom itself to the sensation. Nothing was really special about her body, except that tonight it was open to me. Now I was allowed to find her desire which (like my own) had always been masked by politeness, schedule conflicts and a tendency to superimpose the intellectual over the romantic. But tonight we were two people alone to the world, grasping, whispering, adoring.

We didn't fuck, if that's what you're wondering. She didn't let me. She had a cold, she said. Didn't want to start anything the day before. When I

told her how crazy I was about her and how deeply I cared about her, Milena took my hand off her breast and said that was why we shouldn't go all the way. It didn't matter, I guess. I knew for the first time that she loved me, that I could be allowed to love her, that for a single night we could dream of the passionate love that might have existed between us. In our slumber, and only in our slumber, did we become lovers.

The next morning was a rush. The alarm failed to go off. As I held her sleeping body in the darkness, I noticed that the nightstand clock said 9:00. Something had gone terribly wrong; we were supposed to receive a wakeup call at 8:15; the plane would leave at 10:35. Cracks of sunlight seeped into the room as I rested my arm over her breasts, allowing myself one final moment of warmth before everything would start moving away. She was sound asleep. I looked at her cheeks, her neck, her curves, her pussy, her ears, her swollen nose, her sleeping face which looked not beautiful or sexy, but intensely private and childlike. I wanted to whisper something into her dozing ear; I wanted to wake her with some soothing remark, something profound or romantic or grateful or warm or sexual or totally attentive. Instead, I said what I had to say: "Milena, wake up. You're late. It's nine o'clock."

Milena kept her eyes closed, and then blinked up at me uncomprehendingly. "Time to get up," I repeated. She glanced at the alarm clock and gasped. "My god!" She jumped out of bed oblivious to our nakedness. "They were supposed to call!" she said.

"Look, get dressed, and we'll get you out of here."

"My god," she cried. "I can't be late after all this! My parents are going to kill me!"

"You're not going to be late."

"Damn!" she said, throwing things into her suitcase with increasing anger. "I told the hotel people how important this wakeup call was."

"Please," I said. "Let's not panic. We'll get to the airport in 15 minutes. Where's your ticket and passport?"

"Over there," she said, half-able to concentrate. "I need to take a shower."

"There's no time."

"It will just be a moment." She rushed into the shower, and I called the front desk for a taxi. While she finished showering, I brought her suitcases down to the taxi stop and waited. 9:07.

Hair still wet and blouse still unbuttoned, Milena came rushing out to the taxi pickup at 9:16.

"Everything ok?" I said.

Milena sat in the taxi and began rummaging through her purse while the taxi sped away.

"Is there a problem?" I said.

"No, where's your cellphone?"

"Here," I said, handing it to her. Last night we had talked about her using it for last minute goodbyes.

9:19. While the taxi driver darted through traffic, she talked to her parents about Chicago, the Baden Baden accommodations and when she would call next. Apparently her mother mentioned a blouse she had forgotten. Milena cursed and pleaded with her mom to ship it to Heidelberg. "You can? Excellent!" She smiled and gave me the "thumbs up" sign. "Okay, Mom, I will, okay, yes, not today, yes, I know, probably not, okay, I love you, okay, Mom! I have to go!" She hung up. "What time is it?"

"9.24."

"God!" she said. "I can't believe we're this late. They said to be there 90 minutes early for international flights. Wait!"

"What?"

"She could give my blouse to Diane." She redialed and asked her mom to drop off the blouse at Diane's house. Diane, I guessed, was another student leaving for Heidelberg next week. Milena repeated the instructions and hung up like a changed person, no longer panic-stricken but confident that from now on, everything would go her way. "What time is it?"

"9.26."

"Relax," the driver said, while they sat at a traffic light. The man was used to transporting people frantically trying to make up lost time.

I held her hand tightly and kissed her. "How much time?" I asked.

"Five to seven minutes. No problem at all. After the next turn, I'll have you at International Departures." The taxi lunged past a red light and veered right, pushing Milena against me for an instance.

"This cabdriver is awesome," she whispered. She dialed another number, her brother in New York. He wasn't home, so she left a voice mail. "Hey, it's me, just wanted to say I'm at the airport and about to get on the plane. I promise to tell you about every beer I drink. I love you and by the way, I ended up not taking dad's suitcase after all. Say hello to Emmett, and don't get mad at him for ruining the carpet. Bye!"

"I should call Janice," she said. Janice was her roommate. Milena found the number in the address book and laughed loudly when she answered. Apparently Janice was still in bed. They gabbed rapidly about last night's pasta primavera and how she had overslept and how I had given her the

"grand tour." "By the way," she said to me, "Janice says hello."

"Hello, Janice," I called out to the phone.

9.33. The taxi pulled in, and we stormed through the airport terminal, weaving through youth groups and luggage carts and pilots to find flight information on the wall of monitors. Lines were everywhere, and whole families were snaking around the cordoned maze of lines. Irrelevant announcements on the loudspeaker called attention to the fact that – depending on your circumstances – time was either standing still or rushing by. When we stopped at Milena's airline, at least 80 people stood in line ahead of us.

9.37. I walked past the people in line to a nearby ticket counter, explaining Milena's situation. The woman waved me forward, and I called out to Milena, who immediately hung up the phone and hurried over. After the clerk took the bags, checked her ID and handed her a boarding pass, Milena breathed a sigh of relief and told the woman, "Thank you for saving my butt!"

9.44. We ran unencumbered to the security checkpoint. When we stopped at the line (actually a series of 6 different lines), I said, "wait!"

"What?"

I grabbed her, held her and kissed her in full public view, oblivious to the people and the rush of everything, the fact we were out of breath and the world was waiting for us to say goodbye. Time was running through us and past us, and yet this single kiss kept our hearts momentarily in the present. I couldn't bring myself to let go. "I don't want you to leave. "

Milena sighed and laughed affectionately. "So after all this running around, you tell me not to leave." She planted a quick kiss softly on my lips. I noticed that we stood underneath a digital clock that read 9:49. "Thank you for your help," she said, handing my cellphone back to me. "You've been fantastic."

"Thank you," I said in a low voice, still holding her. "I'm glad we could be totally open about everything."

"Yes. What a surprise!"

"By the way, how's your cold?"

She smiled. "Not bad, surprisingly. It's a good day for traveling."

"You have my email address?"

"Don't worry."

"What an evening."

"Oh, Tony."

The line was moving, and she was almost to the front.

"It's time for me to leave," she said.

I held her close, and Milena gave me a quick kiss. "It's time to say goodbye. I'm sorry."

I watched her go through the security checkpoint and walk away.

"Milena!" I called out. "Milena!"

Milena turned around and looked in my direction with amazement or even embarrassment.

I didn't have anything to say. I just wanted to see her face one last time.

"The prison, " I said. "Make sure to send a photo of the prison."

At first, she didn't understand, but when I repeated it, she nodded, gave me a crazy look and said something inaudible while waving one last time.

She turned around and seconds later, she was gone. I just stood there, underneath a clock that read 9:53, watching the people flow by – an Indian family rushing to greet a father, an older woman looking out for her ride, a flight attendant cheerfully towing her luggage. Then it hit me. She was gone, all gone. An excited caress, a private laughter, a momentary sense that the world was not all loneliness.

Lisa and the narrator share contradictory views on the erotic life of a college student. (**Read more**)

Miniature Golf

Quick comic tale of two horny high school teens talking endlessly about sex.

John and Jeffrey decided one day to play golf. The miniature kind. The kind with astroturf so worn out you could see the cement underneath. The kind whose obstacles were more picturesque than challenging: the water bridge, the bricks arranged like a five-point star. The kind any idiot could get a hole-in-one just by hitting the ball straight.

John and Jeffrey liked to play miniature golf. They played regularly at Vinnie's Fantasy Golf when there was nothing better to do. John and Jeffrey also had conversations, although John usually did most of the talking.

"What's the score?" John asked.

Jeffrey looked at the scorecard. "As of the ninth hole," he said, "you have

21. I have 26."

John knew he was winning. He was always winning. But he kept having to remind himself that the highest score was the lowest score, that the one with the fewest points was the winner.

"At utterly mindless game," John muttered to himself. Jeffrey ignored him, concentrating on the next hole. "You get the ball in the hole. Then what?" He put the ball down and studied the path to the next hole. "Where's the challenge? Look. The hole's straight ahead. No obstacles, no slopes, no hidden traps. I should complain. We should have gone to the other course. You should see it. It has a castle, a moat, even artificial alligators. You gotta see it. Their jaws open and shut every few seconds. It's wild. My turn? Good, let the professional demonstrate. There, you see? A hole-in-one. I wasn't even concentrating. Maybe I should close my eyes for the rest of the game. What's the score?"

John and Jeffrey liked to talk philosophy. At high school age, philosophy meant using words you knew the other person wouldn't know. Besides philosophy, John and Jeffrey talked about sex. And girls. Sex, girls, the same thing.

John and Jeffrey had never seen or touched a real grown-up female tit. For John, this was one of life's tragedies.

Nights at Vinnie's Fantasy Golf were less than wild. The mosquitoes feasted on the blood of unprotected arms and legs. Speakers blasted Top 40 songs into the evening. Artificial lights gave the place an otherworldly glow. The bathrooms smelled like PortoCans and constant mopping. The Coke machine had a "No Refunds" sign and a graffiti note in pencil. It said, *"This machine is a monster. It eats money!"*

But the place had girls. Gobs of them, all ages, everywhere. At holes ahead of them, behind them, keeping scores with miniature pencils (everything was miniature here). Girls on dates. Girls from the public high school, a place where girls and guys actually *sat next to one another in class*, brushing elbows as they twiddled their secret locker combinations.

John and Jeffrey liked the word fuck. They added it dutifully to conversations. They said it as nonchalantly as the words "nonconformist," "raison d'etre" or "Nietzsche."

"This is so pathetic," John said, stepping to the next hole. "It's Saturday evening, and what are we doing? Playing miniature golf. What losers! Why are we here? The world awaits with sexual opportunities. Look at the guys with the babes at the seventh hole. It's all so unfair. For now we have an excuse for inexperience. For now we can blame the all-boys high school for every fucking thing wrong with us. But who's going to buy that excuse in

college? You know what they say in *Penthouse* magazines, the stories about the sorority fuck fests, the strip poker parties, the nymphos who'll fuck anybody, even nerds, like us. Jeffrey, I ask you, what can we do to prepare ourselves? So what if our SAT scores are astronomical! So what if our high school required four years of science instead of three! So what if we took enough Latin to translate our fucking diploma! What difference will it make when a hot juicy pussy is waiting on your dorm bed, and you haven't the foggiest idea what to do?

"This city is loaded with thousands of fuckable girls. Open your eyes! They are everywhere you look, driving the expensive cars, swimming at the pool, sitting ahead of you at the movies, so close you can see the smooth thighs and smell the gum they chew out of sexual nervousness. So many fuckable girls, so many single fuckable girls with not a boyfriend in sight, waiting to be asked out to dinner, waiting to be brought to a miniature golf course, waiting for your hands to spread their legs in the back seat of your car. One Czech guy said 95% of girls would strip if you asked them nicely. Ninety-five percent! And he was talking about the repressed Czech girls; the ones here must be fucking nymphomaniacs! This city is a breeding ground for lovely fuckable girls. Out of two million people in Houston, a million are female; about three hundred thousand are of fuckable age. At least! So there's three hundred thousand fuckable females out there, and at least a third of these fuckable females are girls we wouldn't mind fucking. That's a total of one hundred thousand fuckable girls, take your pick. And out of those one hundred thousand, you could bet at least thirty thousand would love to fuck us. Thirty thousand fuckable fuckworthy girls who would love to fuck us! That's just a conservative estimate! It could be forty thousand, fifty thousand, who knows! Out of that thirty thousand fuckable beautiful women who'd want to fuck us, at least five thousand would even be willing to pay cold hard cash for the chance. Can you believe that? Five thousand eager naked women. We're talking about a whole fucking subdivision of nymphomaniacs, complete with homeowner's associations and gardening clubs! This city is 600 square miles, right? That means that less than a mile away there are eight gorgeous fuckable women who would pay us to fuck them. Eight gorgeous women! And what are we doing? Playing miniature golf! Shouldn't we be knocking on doors, stopping people at supermarkets, sending out mass mailings?"

John stopped talking. "What hole are we on?" he asked.

"Eighteenth," Jeffrey said and put his ball down. The final hole resembled a small house. Players had to hit the ball up a steep ramp to reach the green on the roof. The hole was where the chimney should be.

The hole was important and challenging. Anyone playing it in one shot won a free game. Unless that happened (and it rarely did), the ball disappeared down the hole for good. The hole was actually a small tunnel that returned balls to the supply bin. It was the management's way of keeping people from playing the same ball forever.

Jeffrey hit the ball too hard. It went quickly up the ramp, rebounding against the far wall and settling behind a long wooden block. John took heed from Jeffrey's example and gently tapped the ball up the ramp. The ball went halfway up, then down again, rolling back to his feet. No matter how many times he hit it, the ball just kept rolling back.

The narrator and Lisa discuss the male and female versions of sex-obsessed protagonists. Is Carrie Bradshaw the female Portnoy? (**Read more**)

A Marriage Counselour Reminisces About the Future

Why does a man desire a woman he does not love? Such a simple question, such a metaphysical dilemma.

So I, alas, my lady, sometimes roam
to seek in other faces you alone.
Petrarch, *Canzioni*, XVI

The woman I love is not the woman in my arms. My fiance is thousands of miles away, doing whatever entomologists do to write their PhD's. I'm not worried; Mary stays in touch; her handwritten letters are full of longing and anticipation. They give me strength and confidence about our

future together. Mary was supposed to return from Brazil next month, but her last letter mentioned a three month delay. I remain patient; I've waited seven months; surely I can wait another three. Mary, as long as your heart stays with me, time and distance become meaningless. These past few months have been bearable but empty; whenever the apartment becomes silent, my mind drifts to thoughts of your voice, your laughter, your touch. I dream about your body and your lovely funny desire, the intimate details of our lovemaking, the feel of your hands inside my own. I spend every night fantasizing; I foster a secret fear that when you return, our passionate enthusiasm will have changed into something less remarkable. No, that cannot happen. I know you. But every time an unsteady palpitation of doubt seizes my heart, I wonder.

Mary, you are with me in my heart, even as I embrace Tanya. The two of us are sprawled on the floor with friends. It is a weekend party with the gang. We are laughing, telling jokes, drinking. Someone suggested group backrubs, and we broke off into male-female pairs, switching for a while, then settling into semi-permanent partners. The whole thing was innocent enough; we were just relaxing, not trying to initiate some orgiastic ritual. But a kind of promiscuity was in the air. We were just out of college, unattached though not eager to fall in love. We enjoyed pleasures directly and without complications. We lived life as though it were some simple script with simple emotions; we played the game with enthusiastic agreement.

I eventually settled with Tanya, and we took turns kneading one another's backs. You remember Tanya; she was Julie's roommate: the tall thin girl who liked rollerblading. She had long dark hair, a relaxed, smartalecky smile and nimble hands that pressed firmly against the curves of my back. Before this, we had only exchanged a few words, but now we had time to talk and knead simultaneously. We talked about the usual things: movies, friends, the city. We really had little in common; she liked the outdoors and complained about her accounting job. I liked her though; we were comfortable together. And yes, she looked desirable in her shorts and T-shirt. I could hear and even feel her breath behind my neck and occasionally, her naked thighs brushed against my knees. As I put my arms around her to massage her back, I imagined having complete freedom to caress her any way and anywhere; she was already close, and I had only to reach down a few inches to give the situation an erotic meaning. As we talked, Tanya smiled and nodded her head, closing her eyes and going off into a trance. When she opened them again, she laughed and offered to switch places. She kneaded my shoulder blades slowly. Again I felt her

breath against the cotton of my shirt and even the outline of her curvy bosom against my back. Someone at the party passed around a bowl of chips. I took some and handed the bowl to her. As we switched places again, someone made a joke about what Mary would think about this hanky-panky? Everybody laughed. Tanya asked about your bug research. Surely she knows about our engagement. But that didn't change how she treated me; I represented the safety and stability of the unthreatening male. She allowed me so close to her beautiful body because she knew I'd never dare to make a pass. Still, she must have sensed what effect her presence had on me, the nervousness and excitement of disguised desire. She flirted with danger without consciously willing anything unseemly to happen. Perhaps she secretly wished for me to act out some desire. Perhaps she wanted a relationship, or merely the gratification of rejecting a man who'd give up his fiance for her.

That's my professional analysis. Mary, do I sound like a therapist yet? Hopefully by next year I will. Only four weeks of clinical training remains, and then I can take my licensing exam. When you see me next, I'll be teaching people to overcome unhealthy patterns in personal relationships. Tanya will be the first of many dysfunctional women I'll run into. She seems drawn to people who give her sexual attention but who won't (or can't) reciprocate. It's sad. But terribly alluring. Don't worry, Mary, I'm not falling under her spell. But I can't help be aware of the erotic possibility this woman was presenting. Holding Tanya in my arms, I realize that the girl I loved was not always the girl I desired, that the inner desires for another could in fact be an obstacle to love. Mary, the first time we embraced was a holy moment for me; something had changed; something new and hopeful and magical had come into being when our lips first touched; I found peace with the world and cancelled all metaphysical complaints; life suddenly seemed just; daily annoyances became things I no longer worried about.

The beauty of loving comes from the act of teaching your lover how you wish to be loved. Although I fell into you rapidly and easily, I recognized that our relationship would never encompass all my desires; when we made love, I became aware of a point in space outside our relationship, like a point in space outside a circle. I could ignore it and try turning away, but I still had to acknowledge its existence. This point in space was a desire for something, someone, whatever it was, which you could never satisfy. This point in space was the part of myself that never compromised or apologized or felt satisfied. It was the part of my heart which will never belong to you (or me) and you will try constantly to uncover. This point in

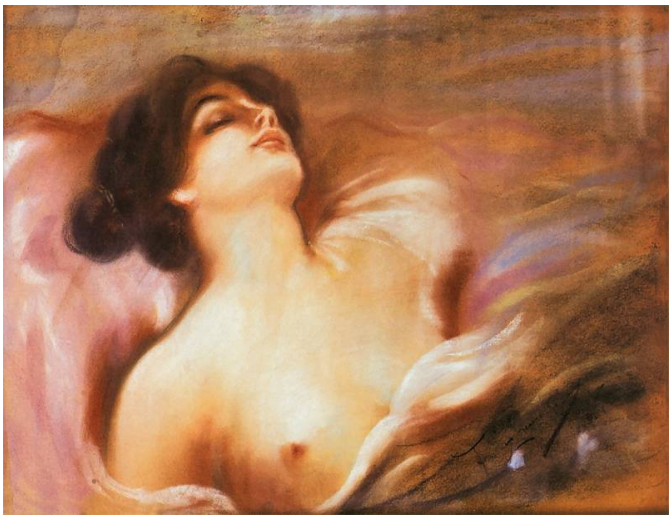
space is my lust, my secret self, my longing for what you cannot be and cannot do. Even if I embarked on some Casanova-like quest to find (and sleep with) the perfect woman for me, I would notice — maybe not on the first night, or even the second — the same point in space appearing in peripheral vision, hovering above me like a star.

Mary, when I am with you, I am always thinking of that imaginary point in space above me. And when I am with Tanya, you — and only you — are that point of space I dream about.

Lisa writes a letter from Mary which responds to the first letter and laments the vagaries of the human heart. (**Read more**)

Teenage Girl Masturbating – Multiorgasmic

A video of a teenage girl's masturbation becomes an Internet sensation … and also an enigma.



It started simply enough; a teenage girl in bra and panties sits awkwardly on a hotel bed. Someone offscreen makes her smile and roll her eyes and say something inaudible. The video goes black, changing to the same girl on the bed – now nude – slowly touching herself. The camera strolls around the bed, settling inches from her face; she twitches her nose, laughs and sticks out her tongue. The camera retreats and zooms carelessly in and out. The girl has started touching herself again, but is interrupted by a noise. "Apa?" she calls out, flustered. Black. Moments later, she is back, this time with a humming vibrator. The camera zooms to the detail of the vibrator on the girl's pussy, as though the rest of her body were a minor detail to this buzzing show. Back to her face now – where something offscreen has caught her attention. At first, she doesn't understand and stops, motioning to the right. "Mee don," she says – not with any strong emotion, as though making a casual (even banal) remark.

Moments later, she resumes her masturbation, the buzzing barely audible above her breaths. The girl smiles politely at the camera and closes her eyes. When she opens them again, she makes a series of yawning hiccups that sound childlike and almost comic. The camera remains on her for a good ten seconds, but her face is perfectly still. Her mouth opens a bit, but her eyes remains closed; she is rubbing away, lost in faraway drowsiness.

The girl nods and twists her neck while her tongue hangs out like a person in epileptic shock. Sucking in her cheeks, she gives two dainty grunts … and a languorous sigh. She begins to whine; eventually the whining matches the pace of her rapid hand movements until it ends in a giant grunt. She relaxes and closes her eyes, letting the vibrator settle over her most sensitive parts. She lies there, savoring the feeling until she discovers one more nugget of sensation. Without making a sound, she keeps nodding her head. Finally, she sucks in her breath, tilts her head back and exhales. The transformation of her face from flirty girl to grunting monster was startling and even grotesque. For an instant the little girl was back; seconds later she was a wanton woman whose legs were stretched open without shame. For long periods of time she seemed comatose, silent except the buzzing of the vibrator. Faint traces of anticipation appear on her face; biting her lips, she gives a quick yelp, then an amorphous sound of pleasure. Eventually she catches her breath and sinks into the pillow. She looks up wearily, smiling at the camera with a combination of amusement and contempt.

The camera rests uncomfortably on her face for a few seconds, as though waiting for her to speak. Then the video ends.

This video was uploaded to the file sharing networks in early 2006. For a few months, nobody noticed it, but after it was posted to a porn video board, people began downloading it like crazy. The file (which was 3 minutes and 38 seconds and 62.1 megabytes) was titled, *Teenage girl masturbating – multiorgasmic* and downloaded in minutes. Soon it shot to the top of the Most Popular Downloads chart. There was even a comment section (rapidly expanding) with comments like this:

```
  How I would love to fuck that girl's tight
cunt!
  Jesus, where has that girl been all my
life!!!???
  Maybe she could teach my girlfriend a thing or
two....
  Girlfriend?....I wish she could teach the
entire female population
```

I could watch this girl's show … wish she were cuter though.

Cuter???? Jesus fucking Christ. She's a total hottie.

Meh. Only a 7 or 7.5

9.

-2 points because she's a Spic. I'd fuck her though.

Spic. What are you talking about? She's Asian!

This girl is a goddess.

Agreed with previous post. She's a total goddess.

Where's the rest of this video?

That dickhead doesn't know what he's talking about. She's a 10 and a killer 10, no doubt about it.

She's not Asian...she's Indonesian.

Is this girl a professional? Does anyone have any other videos?

Look at her expression at 1:02. OMG!

Sorry not my type. But still I never knew 1 girl could have so many orgasm.

My girlfriend is like this sometimes.... But she's a bitch.

I think she's a pro. Looks like Magda Ivonin

I hate to be rude. But she looks like a total retard. Does she have a disease?

Well, if that's a disease, I wish every fucking girl out there had it.

Geez. I gotta show this to my girlfriend.....

Yeah, and then show her some gangbangs...that will cheer her up...

Holy cow! I honestly had no idea some girls came so many times.

She looks like a chimpanzee when she cums - see 2:08.

Fake.

Fake? Fuck you man! It's the real thing.

Agreed. Nobody could fake that. See especially 1:52

Man, where does this girl live?

Agreed that this is an amateur. None of these Euro porn stars ever have real orgasms.

Man, I could watch this same video 100 times.

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  Agreed. I would definitely bring this one if I
were stranded on a desert island.
  This girl is nothing compared to Suzie Sexy's
double dildo scene.
  I like it how the girl just explodes at 2:09.
How long do you think she could go on doing that?
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The puerile (but generally adulatory) comments flowed over 10 or 15 pages. The download link was copied onto other bulletin boards and file sharing networks, generating scores of comments. Even the name of the download file underwent several variations. *Ex-girlfriend_ masturbating*, *Psychomasturbator*, *German girl masturbating*, *Multiorgasm Indonesian teen*, *Miley Cyrus secret masturbation scene*, *Amateur teen multiorgasmic*.

Online discussion boards speculated about the video's origin. Early commenters said the girl had to be Indonesian – even though the girl didn't look particularly Asian and nothing in the video suggested this (other than the fact that "Apa" meant "what" in Indonesian). Eventually a webmaster said that the original uploader's IP address was American, putting all speculation to rest. Or did it? Frankly, the room (a hotel room?) seemed too ramshackle to be found in any developed country. And the camera and resolution didn't seem particularly high quality – it might even have come from a cell phone. The video file was analyzed for clues, but the scenery was bereft of props (except an ugly painting of a pomegranate on the wall). The girl was wearing a light blue t-shirt and dark jeans. Even her hair style seemed generic. There was a birth mark on her stomach and an earring on her left nose, but no tattoos. Based on the sound and appearance, the vibrator was quickly identified as an American brand produced in China, but this didn't help much. One commenter argued that the multiorgasmic girl video was part of a series of lone girl videos called "Hotel Room Encounters." For a while, commenters compared girls in HRE vids to multiorgasmic girl. The room of multiorgasmic girl definitely resembled those in HRE videos, but other than that, there was no connection.

No one could explain why this video had become so popular. It couldn't be simply that she had achieved 4 orgasms in 3 1/2 minutes. Perhaps it was the way a quiet and ordinary-looking teenager had transformed into a slut monster within minutes. Although many found the video erotic in its own weird way, the way she wrinkled her face and clawed at the bed during climax struck people as hilarious. It was even more hilarious when a minute later she did it again (and two more times before the end).

Soon this video became the most popular on the porn channels and

download sites – some say the entire Internet. Certain risque bloggers linked to it, and the video soon trickled into mainstream venues. Someone turned it into a 5 second loop alternating between the girl's innocent pre-orgasm face and her wanton expression afterwards. Several European dance clubs took a 30 second loop from the video and projected it on the wall while people danced the night away. The video was introduced on the porn forums, copied multiple times, made into online avatars and parodied on mainstream humor sites before viewers even knew what it referred to. The original video usually had branded advertising at the bottom of the screen, and sometimes the zip file contained viruses. It reached the point where most of the videos labeled *Teenage girl multiorgasmic* were anything but that; instead they were old men fucking or anime or promos for the latest porn site.

Soon there were imitation videos. Two or three porn stars with a slight resemblance to the original girl made their own multiorgasmic videos, and a person who hadn't seen the original might assume that these slick and professional versions were in fact the original. The imitation videos (as it turns out) were simply a promo for a new Brazilian porn site, but even the people who had seen the original recognized these imitations as "interesting." Strangely, the original video often made cameo appearances in other porn videos. In one of the most downloaded, a lesbian couple embraces on a bed while watching the video of multiorgasmic girl on TV. While one lesbian watches the video, her partner kneels down to kiss her pussy; the point of view alternates between the grainy resolution of multiorgasmic girl and the sighing lesbian who is close to orgasm herself. As the lesbian's face clenches in anticipation, the climaxes of multiorgasmic girl echo from the TV. When the lesbian finally unwinds into a noisy orgasm, the lesbian scene is revealed to be a porn scene being watched by another lone girl who is masturbating as well.

Go to any porn forum and you will find a dozen threads devoted to unraveling the mystery of this multiorgasmic girl video. There are frame-by-frame analyses, detective work into the painter of the pomegranate picture and even an analysis about how the girl's bone structure helped her to have orgasms. One thread had photographs of hotel rooms that resembled the original one. Someone posted a list "10 Signs a Girl is Secretly Multiorgasmic" while another added doodles and silly subtitles to show what the girl was really thinking about (apparently it was "her next shoe purchase" and "reasons why Barry Manilow was a better singer than Frank Sinatra"). The video was widely discussed by women. How could they hope to compare in bed to multiorgasmic girls like these? Could this ease

in having orgasms ever be learned? Was it giving men unrealistic expectations about how women behaved in bed? Was it good to bring the video camera into the bedroom? Was this girl liberated or exploited? If the women did come forward, should she be celebrated by women as well?

Later it was announced that multiorgasmic girl would show up in a virtual world as herself. News of the upcoming appearance spread among porn fans around the world. Most thought it would be a fake, but a number showed up at the appointed time for curiosity's sake. Almost 2000 avatars showed up at the virtual theater; most were presumably male, but about 40% of the avatars were scantily-dressed females; one avatar was a giant who had a virtual cock about twice his height; every so often one or two avatars in schoolgirl uniform climbed up to suck it or fuck it. Various herds of people throughout the audience killed time by engaging in sexual antics – to the extent permitted by the virtual world. But most in the virtual audience stood around, floating in midair while waiting for something to happen.

Promptly at UTC 16:00 the music started and lights dimmed in the virtual theater. Ten exotic dancers with bright multicolored skin pranced onstage and performed acrobatics around their respective poles. Lights swirled around the walls, and the music became louder; a sparkling purple cloud appeared in the center. A woman in a British accent welcomed everybody to the "world's first multiorgasmic extravaganza," and out of the cloud emerged a fully disrobed woman with an uncanny resemblance to multiorgasmic girl. She introduced herself as Jana and talked about her "secret passions" and "Italian boyfriend" and endless nights of passion which she hoped someday to let people see. Then multiorgasmic girl started masturbating and other dancers followed suit; the self-pleasuring sounds came not only from the actual multiorgasmic girl, but by what seemed to be hundreds of others. A rapid photo montage of women in pleasure flickered along the back wall, and every time multiorgasmic girl reached a peak, the gigantic purple cloud rained golden streaks over the theatre. These erotic-pyrotechnics lasted 25 minutes; it wasn't awful, but most found it tiresome after only five minutes.

Why hadn't the real multiorgasmic teen surfaced? Why hadn't she tried to cash in? Various names of porn stars with a passing resemblance to the girl were suggested and rejected. Some forums even had a photo contest; people would submit photos of girls from real life, and whoever submitted the photo judged to be the most similar to multiorgasmic girl would receive a free porn membership. It was all an underground thing; most of the uploaded photos were of ordinary girls who would have been horrified

to learn where their photos were appearing; nobody believed that the contest winner (shown sitting on a park bench in a European city) was the "real" multiorgasmic girl, but the resemblance was uncanny.

One website set up a $1000 reward if the original girl would come forward to do another video. As a result of online donations and pledges, that amount was quickly upped to $10,000. A $500 reward was even put up for any information about the filming of this video or the girl's identity. The manufacturer of the sex toy in the video offered $20,000 if the girl came forward and agreed to be the company's international spokesman. A leading porn company offered $30,000 if she agreed to make another video and $50,000 if she agreed to sign a contract. A Russian company offered $100,000 if she agreed to appear in a gangbang scene with ten men, but the offer was not taken seriously – even though the same company had thrown money around for similar kinds of stunts. One middle-aged executive set up an online shrine to multiorgasmic girl with a letter proposing marriage (or at least a provisional engagement). He offered to fly her to Canada and pay for her college education – no strings attached – while she got to know him better. The man's letter was translated into 8 languages; among porn watchers, this man became the butt of jokes and a kind of icon for how ridiculously far a person could take his adulation.

Reports of the $150,000+ awaiting this girl appeared in mainstream newspapers (along with columns about the exploitation of female porn stars). Even in developed countries $150,000 was a lot of money, and quite a few women came forward to claim it. The main problem was how to confirm that the person claiming the reward was in fact the girl from the original video. Even the people who offered the reward admitted that the original girl would have changed her appearance and might disappoint those who most wanted her to come forward.

In the forums people wrote fan fiction about the multiorgasmic teen or spurious adventures about the girl and her vibrator. Many wondered if the girl would *ever* be identified. In a planet of six billion people, surely someone would eventually recognize her. Porn watchers were only a subset of the world's population, but people generally believed that with enough clues (and eyeballs), any mystery could be solved. Many thought that the girl had changed her appearance or hair color or lived in a part of the world without porn. By now, this girl had probably figured out that she was unusual and might already know about how famous the video was. Yet for unknown reasons she had declined to come forward. People offered various theories; maybe she was already married (and her husband didn't know!) Maybe she lived in a country which prohibited Internet porn

(preventing anyone who might recognize her from seeing the video). Maybe she had a respectable job or didn't want to be reminded of her past. Maybe she feared how it would disgrace her family. Many commenters felt it was her duty to come forward; anyone with the ability to reach orgasms so effortlessly had a gift which ought to be shared … not only for horny men but women seeking bedroom advice. Maybe the girl had an unusual medical condition or special diet or some pivotal childhood event or distinctive personality trait which helped her to have orgasms so easily. Never mind morality; why would a girl reject a quasi-profession where she would automatically be crowned a superstar? Maybe the girl was shy or educated enough to know the dangers of celebritydom. Maybe she feared for her privacy or wanted to pursue a more noble (and less public) career.

Was she a spy? A librarian? A missionary? One online forum even reported a rumor that the girl had entered a convent in Mexico and agreed to wear conservative dress and a chastity belt for the rest of her life. Many individuals posted "reports" of meeting her or seducing her or convincing her to do another private masturbation performance. These reports generally did not try to be credible, but placed multiorgasmic girl in improbable situations – on the top of a Ferris wheel, watching a sad foreign movie in a theatre, waiting in a traffic jam – and feeling an uncontrollable urge to masturbate. Sometimes she would be seduced by a random stranger who learned about her special talent. Usually the multiorgasmic girl in this fiction would be an ordinary college student or housewife going about her business … finding herself alone with a bus driver or gynecologist or uncle or auto mechanic or boss or professor. The girl/woman/mom would always offer token resistance, but at the slightest touch by a man would slip into an endless stream of badly described orgasms. The fiction was implausible. Yet the original video reminded people that at least one person in the world could have played the part.

The girl in the video did not look like a porn star or a stripper (although she may very well have been one). She was not a model; she was just somebody's girlfriend or fuckfriend who had agreed to do a masturbating video. Everybody knew about her, but nobody knew her. And to tell the truth, nobody really cared about her. She was just a phenomena who had accidentally stumbled into the world of Internet porn. And yet she was a subject of intense interest and curiosity by millions around the world. A few months later, another Internet phenomena would infect people's mind (distracting them again), and multiorgasmic girl would join the multitude of half-remembered pop culture has-beens.

Somewhere in the sex forums among the hundreds of spurious

anecdotes about the video's origins is one written by John ML (a pseudonym). Unlike the rest of the anecdotes, this one happens to be the truth.

> I am the person who shot the video. It was Sonia, a girl in Maracaibo when I was there working on a three month project. Sonia worked at a nearby sandwich shop (and tagged along when I strolled around the city). She talked fast, had a temper and always was outrageous; the video camera (which I also used to capture the sights of the city) did not faze her one bit. She poured Cabernet Sauvignon all over my chest and sipped it up with her mouth. Then she poured some over her breasts and dared me to do the same. Her English was dreadful; at first it seemed cute, but unfortunately that girl never shut up. By the third day, I was growing weary of her, and I put the video on the Net two years later – after learning she had died.

Lisa and the narrator argue about tennis. (**Read more**)

Elementary School Amore

How does longing feel like to children before they learn about sex?

What was life like before you learned about sex? How did it feel?

Some are introduced to sex prematurely, either by accident or malicious design. Others learn by reading a book or watching an explicit film or hearing older friends describe things a boy and girl can do. Today's elementary school students are stumbling upon adult web pages, viewing it as a sort of gross comic entertainment. This encounter can be upsetting or even traumatic (which only years of reassurance or therapy can overcome). It can be a moment of hilarity or the start of a long journey of discontent.

But what it like before sex?

Three memories stay with me.

One.

As a 9 year old boy I was swimming, playing baseball and board games, going to scout meetings and riding my bike around the neighborhood. I knew the girls around the block and was polite but rarely spoke to them. In a word, they were boring. As athletes girls were inferior; they said bossy things and talked about dolls and rollerskating. At school it was different. Girls were funny and talkative and artistic and cute – yes, I noticed these things. Girls had purses and pretty clothes and always knew the answer. When they sat next to me, I felt I had to behave; I had to treat them differently. I knew that boys and girls belonged together in a singsong way. When the teachers divided us into groups, it would always be boy-girl-boy-girl, as though girls were some kind of buffer against anarchy. Intellectually I knew girls were important – they were after all 50% of the class – but I didn't know why they were important. Why they mattered.

Neighborhood kids usually played outside, so we rarely went into people's houses (except to use the restroom or get a drink). For months I played with a rough-and-tumble boy named Henry. One day he took me upstairs and showed me a large cardboard box. Perhaps it was from a refrigerator or a television. But it was big enough to sit inside, and judging from the creases and its place in the bedroom, he had been playing with it for days. I must have crawled inside for a few minutes; perhaps we used it as a fort and moved on to some other game.

We were talking about nothing in particular when he blurted out a secret. "Do you know what I'm going to do with that box?"

"No, what?"

"I'm going to bring Jenny Langdon over my house, and we're going to sit inside that box. Together, all alone, just the two of us. And do you know what we're going to do? When we're inside the box, we're going to close the lid until it's totally dark. And then we're going to kiss – naked!!"

Henry pronounced those last words with glee, aware that what he was describing was so forbidden and thrilling that adults should never find out. We quickly turned to some other game, but I couldn't get the image out of my mind. It seemed so bizarre! Besides, what if you got caught?

Jenny was a lovely girl from school whom I knew vaguely. So nice and friendly; how could she be capable of that? Still, although the thought of a boy and girl kissing naked in a box struck me as ridiculous, it also was alluring. If I had to choose any girl to kiss naked in a box, Jenny wouldn't be a bad choice. I knew what kissing was, and I knew that girls and boys did it, although I was not ready for that (and frankly, it did not bother me at all). And I imagined the clumsy limbs groping blindly in the box, the embarrassing lack of boundaries, the way Jenny would sit next to me,

laughing, whispering into my ear. It all sounded like a big joke that one did on a dare; would girls ever want to do that? Henry said Jenny was going to, and maybe that's what boys and girls did. Maybe she was even eager.

But how could you find out? How could you find a girl who would agree to crawl inside that kind of box? How did Henry persuade her?

About 6 years later I ran into Jenny again. She had transferred to my middle school. She was 15 years old, a bosomy beauty, a cheerleader, a girl used to male attention and flattery. She went on dates and even had a boyfriend. I was surprised to see her again—and certainly she remembered me from elementary school, although we didn't have much to talk about. Henry had left my life long ago, but that indelible image of Henry and Jenny naked in the box stayed with me. And look—-now Jenny was a woman! How did Henry know Jenny would become so gorgeous?

Then it hit me: Henry had lied! Jenny, the box, the naked kissing—it was all one ridiculous lie. When he first said it, I had wondered, but in the back of my mind I thought, maybe it did happen. But in 8th grade it became clear; what Henry described was not a plan but a wish. He had used words to turn Jenny into an agreeable plaything with semi-obscene inclinations. And stupid fool that I was, I believed him!

By that time I knew all about sex and was adept at mentally undressing all the girls (even teachers) in my school. I was already directing lavish erotic movies in my mind even though talking with a girl still required superhuman courage.

Jenny had also changed. She learned to regard male attention as a pleasant inconvenience that came with being popular. She liked being cute and flaunting it, but knew that some boys would try to take things too far, concocting a slutty version of herself far removed from reality. That was how gossip spread. I had no special insight into this girl, except that the fantasy version of herself (a version created by Henry, myself and others), would be something she'd spend her teenage years trying to kill.

Second Memory.

In second grade desks were grouped in fours, and so were the students. We sat boy-girl-boy-girl, changing places every few weeks for variety. At second grade the main problem was boredom. You had worksheets to complete, math problems to zip through and maps to color. But the smart kids finished early, leaving ample time to talk and goof around.

I sat next to Stacy, a tall talkative girl who liked being the center of attention. She was smart, but not the intellectual type. She was just somebody who talked a lot.

Once during quiet time (when we lay our heads on the desk for 10

minutes), I leaned over to Stacy and whispered something in her ear. To this day I have no idea what I asked, but it was something about schoolwork: perhaps to borrow a pencil or to ask a question about the assignment. When I began whispering, Stacy said loudly, "Teddy, are you trying to kiss me?" The rest of the class giggled.

I repeated my question, but she said, "Teddy's trying to kiss me!" Laughter.

"I am not," I said firmly, loud enough for the others to hear. I tried to ask again.

"Teddy, if you're going to try to kiss me, I'm going to tell the teacher."

"I'm not trying to kiss you!" I said. Everyone laughed again, and the teacher warned us to keep quiet. Stacy smiled, making it clear that she was enjoying my irritation, regarding it as a kind of game.

How that girl irritated me! I felt the victim of injustice and false witness, deciding to stay mad at this girl forever.

Well, not forever. Not even as long as a day. A few years later, we ended up in the same middle school and even the same classes. Stacy had changed. She was taller and gorgeous and a woman—no doubt about it—but still the mischief maker. In buses and school hallways, she kidded around with me—along with dozens of other guys. I lost count of her boyfriends and gave up trying to remain friends with her. Over the years I ran into her often enough as a teen around the neighborhood (even though we went to different high schools) and even at my part time job during college. Every time I saw her (only minutes at a time), we would "catch up" and she would make some joking reference to school memories: drama club, mock trial, swim team. She kept me vaguely apprised of her situation: now seeing someone, working for a radio station, living with dad. And every time she left, I would think, "what a fun gal!" and "if only I had the courage to ask her out."

Stacy had mastered the fine art of flirtation. She could flirt with anybody, anyplace, anytime. I went back to memories of Stacy in middle school, remembering the way she teased people (especially guys). She wasn't preternaturally pretty, but the teasing drove guys crazy. It was flattering and infuriating. But just when it began to be fun, she'd go off and find some other guy to talk to. When the guys got together to talk about girls, Stacy's name always came up, though not in a vulgar I-want-to-fuck-her kind of way. The guys viewed Stacy as indomitable, like a bronco one rode for only a few seconds before being tossed. But being tossed was half the fun, and in fact it only increased the desire to try again.

I think back to that day in second grade, the day of that false

accusation. Back then, Stacy seemed to know what I wanted before I did. By making the accusation, she was in fact planting suggestions. Or was she? Years, even decades later, I can't decide whether Stacy was dangling an opportunity or just enjoying the chance to make a scene. What did she want and what did I want? Now I understood: what she said was far less important than how she said it or that she was saying anything at all; the complaints of a woman are always more endearing (and revealing) than polite distance.

Before Stacy gained sophistication, subtlety and charm, I was an early victim of her flirtations; decades later, it is something I wear as a badge of honor.

Third Memory.

The tale of my first True Love. True Love. Jaded adults may scoff, but affections in elementary school are no less intense than later passions.

In 4th grade I shared a table with two people who became my best friends for the year. The first was my True Love (T.L.) whom I will describe below. The other person was George, a clever talented boy who played both tennis and the piano.

T.L. was a well-behaved cheerful girl with good grades. She was pretty in an understated way, and yet, as time went on, it was impossible not to notice her or enjoy her arrival. She wore simple outfits that her mother must have sewn; I always noticed the peculiar designs, the soft puffy fabric, the way it made me want to brush my fingers against the back of her sleeve. In a class photo she posed like a miniature Renoir with hands folded on her lap. To a casual observer her slight fullness of body might seem an imperfection, but it made her seem more friendly, more human, more thoughtful.

T.L. sat between George and me. The three of us worked and played together. Compared to Stacy's raucous teasing, T.L. was positively sedate, and around her George and I were on our best behavior. We both liked T.L, and already a little friendly competition had started about who would sit next to her in class. It never reached the point of jealousy; it was more like a race, much as we raced to be the first to solve the math problems (I was always first). George was clever and funny; I had to give him that; he was also genuinely nice. If T.L. preferred him over me, I could at least understand her choice. I didn't have as many interesting hobbies and was a bit egotistical (yes, I knew it even then), but I wrote funny stories and was a math whiz (my main source of pride). For all-round personality, George was better and nicer. But I had a secret weapon: I loved her more.

To improve the chance of sitting next to her, I came to class early. I did

everything to be in the same line or group as T.L. (although I never ate with her in the lunchroom; for 4th graders, coed dining was still the ultimate taboo). During a normal day it was common for students to hold hands; teachers frequently asked us to hold hands on our way to recess or the music room or the cafeteria. A few times I experienced the thrill of holding T.L.'s hand. Once, in the hallway, when everyone was holding hands with their partner (and I was T.L's partner), I kept my hand locked in hers longer than usual. I had intended to let go eventually, but to my amazement, T.L. kept holding on. Long after everyone had stopped, T.L and I were still doing it. Eventually we had to let go (we couldn't disregard societal norms so flagrantly), but it became clear that she enjoyed the hand-holding too.

From that point on, our mutual affections became obvious. Even George, (who still hung around us) respected our quiet preferences. If I sat somewhere, a few seconds later, she would sit beside me. And if she sat at some place, I was expected to take the closest seat. As we sat, our hands would brush "accidentally" against one another, and then one of us (usually me) would take the initiative to resume the hand-holding. We didn't talk about it or even look at one another when it happened; it was too pleasant (and embarrassing) to acknowledge. Sometimes when there was a shortage of books, we would share one, holding the same book together. While our hands embraced under the table, our shoulders leaned against one another and we pretended not to be enjoying the closeness.

When the teacher showed a movie, students sat or even lay on the rug to watch. On one such day I was lying down on the rug, hoping that T.L. would lie next to me. She did. While the lights were on and the teacher was threading the film, everybody was talking and I was cracking jokes with other boys. But once the movie started and the lights went out, I grasped her hand into mine, and we watched the movie in silence. The movie lasted only 20 minutes, but in hand-holding time it seemed like forever.

At some point I became aware that T.L. was not just a friendly face or a clammy hand, but a body I longed to be close to. I was not yet thinking about sex, but it was the first time I became aware of other ways to be close than holding hands. The movie was running; it was entertaining, and the class was laughing. I glanced at T.L., moving my eyes from her face to the screen and her face again. Back and forth, back and forth. To my astonishment, she was doing the same thing, with her smile barely visible in the darkness. Our glances met and for once did not turn away. I gripped her hand, and she gripped mine firmly, for that was the only way we knew to communicate the feelings deep inside us.

Flash forward to the last day of school. I don't know how T.L. did it, but

she slipped a note into my bag which I found at home. It read:

> Dear —
> I love you very much and want to marry you. I want to kiss you and be with you all the time and spend the rest of my life with you. We could live in a house together and have a family, and we will always be happy. I am glad I know you and hope to see you more next year.

Ok, these were not the literal words, but the first two lines are pretty much what I remembered. The letter staggered me. To say that it filled me with joy was an understatement; it hinted at new possibilities and new kinds of attainments. She wanted the same things I did before I thought about it.

I wish this story had an ending, but remember, I was in 4th grade. From this point on my memory is unclear and full of gaps.

After receiving the note, I burst with the desire to tell someone. I went home and told my sister (one year younger). After making her promise not to tell another living soul, I showed her the letter. Within hours, she had broken the promise. First, she told my little brother, then a friend, and then Mom and Dad. It even became a dinner table conversation and a family joke. I was devastated. Just to hear them say the name was a sacrilege. As a result, I tried to block the girl from my mind.

When we came to school again, something had changed. My infatuation with this girl had departed, not through malice or willful indifference, but just because time had passed.

In 7th grade my family moved to another neighborhood, which meant going to a new school and making new friends. I managed okay; I played on the basketball team, acted in plays and starred in the math club. During 7th and 8th grade I had attained the status of math prodigy; a special bus brought me everyday to an advanced geometry class at the high school.

I was brilliant. I always excelled in math competitions in the district. During my 8th grade, my school hosted a math competition for all the schools in the district, so lots of unfamiliar smart students were mobbing in the auditorium. To my delight, some old friends from elementary school were there to represent the other middle school. Then I saw her … my True Love. Lovely as ever, albeit shorter and yes, even thinner (or maybe I had just grown). Amazingly, she was with two other friends from elementary school, including my longtime friend, George. I gave them a brief hello, unsure of what to say. Were we supposed to catch up? I didn't know them

well anymore, while the three of them seemed to be have become better acquainted. No matter. I had new friends too and a reputation as a math prodigy to uphold.

Two hours later, they were announcing the winners, and everybody was packed in the auditorium. T.L. and George were sitting next to one another. T.L herself competed in the math contest, without winning anything. But when her friend – our friend – George won 8th place, she applauded vigorously and even gave him a quick hug. While I awaited my name to be called, I couldn't help but notice the way they were talking and laughing. To no one's surprise, I won first prize, but as I went forward to accept the ribbon, I noticed that T.L. and George were no longer paying attention. While my brain had been obsessing over quadratic equations and isosceles triangles, they were enjoying the fact they weren't in class. This award, (I realized), didn't matter.

But I grew up and continued academic pursuits and even other romantic possibilities. Recently though, I have started to comprehend this girl's influence on me. I lost the love letter long ago, but I can still see the lovely loopy letters and that first line, "I love you very much and want to marry you." That was an amazing bit of candor for a 4th or 5th grader, and it made me see that hearts sometimes sing in unison, although all songs come eventually to an end. I honestly don't remember how I treated her the year after the letter. Maybe my silence about the letter offended her or hurt her feelings. Of course I meant no such thing; it was and still is one of my most precious memories.

Over the next few decades I wrote a fair number of love letters, and to be honest, most came to no avail. Here, I suppose, is my chance to talk about heartbreak or the follies of the heart or the ways that hope collides clumsily with reality. The memory of this 4th grader's note (with its loopy penciled handwriting) papers over the heart's disappointments, providing consolation and even hope.

It sounds silly to feel sentimental about a childhood crush, but sometimes my mind wanders to thoughts of where she is. Perhaps she's living a lurid life as a porn star, but no, that is ridiculous. She is somewhere married with children and living an ordinary life. Maybe she's an accountant or lawyer, but I could just as easily see her as a secretary or teacher or social worker. Even at the age of 40, she must still be pleasant company and of course a delight to behold.

Every year or so I play with the idea of looking her up, typing her unmarried name into search engines and telephone directories. Her name wasn't unusual, but remarkably it never shows up in search results, as

though she were some fantasy person I had just dreamt up.

Whenever I return to this imaginary exercise, I contemplate a game plan. I went to a private high school, so I lost touch with people who attended the public high school. But I managed to track George down on the Internet; apparently, he had won a state tennis championship in high school and played competitively at college. It would be fun to catch up with him, though weird.

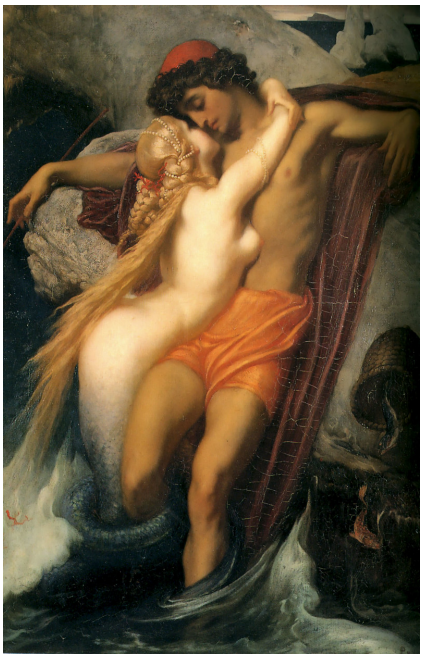
But did George keep in touch with T.L. during high school? The school district had two high schools and three sections (consisting of 700-800 students) in each school. These schools were huge. George's friendship with T.L. might have ended when they reached high school. They probably went to different colleges and lost touch (unless they married!) Actually, two other acquaintances of mine went to that public high school (though in different sections and different years). They could conceivably help me to get in touch with someone who knew her.

Occasionally I come close to following those leads, but the quest seems so weird and hopeless that I end up losing confidence. Even if by some miracle I located her, what would I say? What would she think? As an adult I could be honest in ways that I could never do as a child (I wouldn't even mind showing her this story). I even have enough detachment from those feelings and memories to make it fun. But women are prone to mistrust men who mysteriously reappear out of nowhere. Besides, unless she were a divorcee, chances are she was happily married and busy raising children. She would probably have no place (or patience) for a childhood crush who wanted to exchange memories (however innocent my motives were).

Reluctantly, the realist takes over and convinces myself to abandon the endeavor. To obsess about a childhood sweetheart must be a sign of neuroticism, yes, even delusional thinking. If I still wanted to find her, I would be doing it for selfish motives (however I convinced myself to the contrary). And each time the realist decides once again to abandon the quest, I feel the familiar chill of having abandoned a dream, the familiar ache of never having the opportunity to give one more gentle word or caress. All that stays with me is that moment in the dark, the smile, the hand-holding, the long steady gaze.

The Immaterial Woman

A college girl seduces her boyfriend by playing a game with unusual rules. ...



Luce appeared at the doorway, looking like an angel.

The room was completely dark, so he could only see her outline. But as Luce came closer, he saw she was dressed in a skimpy negligee and a small pair of artificial wings which hung behind her shoulders.

"Do you like angels?" she asked.

"Sure," Steve said.

"Angels have been known to make love to ordinary men, but only for the most deserving."

"Thank you for this honor," Steve said.

"You're welcome," Luce said, laughing, briefly breaking out of character. Then she became serious. "When angels visit, you cannot touch them. You

can enjoy their physical presence, but if you touch them, they fly away."

"I see."

"But … you can still feel their bodies." Steve sat on the bed in his underwear, and she lay centimeters next to him, stroking the hairs on his leg. Luce bent over and kissed him, hovering over him without a single part of their bodies touching. An instant later, her lips met his; bodies and pleasures intertwined.

"Do you want to spend the evening with your angel?"

"Yes."

"You must ask me politely."

"Would you like to spend the evening with me?"

"Yes. Of course. Angels are kind and generous and totally devoted to love." In the dark Steve could see Luce smiling. This was amusing her greatly.

The music ended, and Luce went to her laptop. "Would you like to hear Beethoven?"

"Anything is fine," Steve said. Luce made some selections, and as she lay next to him again, a piano sonata began playing.

"Angels love music," Luce said. "It touches the deepest parts of their souls."

He bent over and kissed her, but she immediately caught him. "You can't do that," she rebuked. "Let an angel offer you a world of caresses, but the moment you make a single groping gesture, she has to leave."

"Sorry," he said with slight mockery. "I didn't know the rules."

A cell phone rang. Annoyed, Luce got off the bed and hunted for the phone in her purse. "It's Sharon," she said and turned the ringer off without answering it. "Interruptions must not happen when an angel is alone with her lover."

"Wait," he said, "can you hand me my cell phone? I don't remember if I turned mine off."

Luce handed him a second cell phone and he pushed a few buttons. "Okay," he said.

"Where were we?" Luce said.

"You were explaining the rules."

"Really there are no rules … except that angels can never be touched. But angels are intimately familiar with sensual pleasures, and enjoy it as much as any man. When an angel falls in love with a man, she will do anything to please him."

"And have you taken a fancy for me?" Steve said.

She bent down and let her chin touch Steve's face. Then she gave him a

light kiss. "Yes," she whispered. "There are pleasures you have wanted and I can give. Am I right?" He could feel her small breasts underneath the negligee as she held him.

"Sure," he said.

"When an angel and a man are alone," Luce said, "any kind of sexual contact is possible … as long as the man never initiates. It is complicated, but men and angels have managed to have many passionate romances over the centuries." Luce rested her chin over his shoulder. "That is every angel's fear: an overeager man whose grasping forces her to leave."

"It is a small sacrifice to make," he said, leaning back and watching Luce kiss his stomach. "Will you take off your clothes?"

"Of course," she said and quickly slipped out of her gown, leaving on the strap with her small decorated wings. The wings were a sight to behold; as she bent over him, seeking the comfort of his embrace, he noticed their delicate patterns, specks of red with a glittery gold, a series of overlapping half-moons. They had brushed against his arm briefly and felt like silk; they looked as delicate as a butterfly's wings. He longed to touch them. …

"Your wings – can I touch them?"

"You mean, *feel* them, not touch them." she said, smiling. She lowered her shoulder and brushed the wings against his arm. He knew it was ordinary fabric, but the way it brushed so lightly against his skin reminded him of her delicate feminine world.

"Can I feel your breasts?"

"Of course," she said, leaning over his chest. "Give me your hand."

She took his arm and wrapped her body around it. He could feel the soft curves of her skin.

"Do you like that?"

"Yes."

"Is there any part of me which your hand would like to feel?"

"Obviously."

"All you have to do is ask," she said.

"Your pussy. My hand would like to feel your pussy."

"No problem," she said, bringing his hand over her panties and pressing it against her. She closed her eyes and smiled as she opened it again.

"I want so badly to make love to you," he said. "It is driving me crazy!"

"It is still possible to make love … as long as we are careful … as long as you accept the limitations … as long as you don't make an accidental move."

"Oh, sure…." he said. "You talk as though you have a lot of experience. Have you played this game before?"

Luce smiled. "Angels play this game for an eternity. If not, they live a life

of loneliness." "Here," she said, taking his hand and moving it to the lower part of her body. "Do you want to feel inside me too?"

"Yes," he said, and she pressed one of his fingers inside her little fold. He could feel her most sensitive parts against his finger. Then, before he realized what was happening, she giggled unexpectedly and said, "I didn't realize how excited I was."

"Or how excited I am."

"Don't worry. Your turn will come soon enough." She bent over and gave him a small kiss.

"Is this the part where I ask for a blowjob and you say yes?"

"Maybe," she whispered, brushing her fingers down his legs. Without saying a word, she took his penis out of his underwear, cupping it in her hands and stroking it lightly. He tensed and sighed. She was playing with him, and he was growing weary of this angel game. He wanted just to fuck her, but was willing (for one night maybe) to play by her rules.

She started kissing down his chest. It relaxed him and made him want to bring her closer. But before he tried, she took his arm and placed it beneath his head. "It is better to keep your arms away so you don't make any accidental gestures."

"Wait a minute," he said laughing. "If you don't let me touch you, your body will never experience mind-blowing amounts of sexual pleasure."

"No, you don't understand," she whined. "Pleasure is not something you can steal from a person. Pleasures are given, not taken. Even female pleasures are aggressive for patient men. What kind of pleasures do you want to try tonight?" she asked.

"Well, you know." he said. "I'd like to go down on you."

"That is possible," she said smiling. "You don't have to be embarrassed."

"I'm not embarrassed!"

"Yes, you are," she said. "Angels want these things too, only it's ... more complicated. Let me show you." Luce straddled him and slowly moved her hips towards his head. "Now stick out your tongue."

Steven stuck out his tongue (feeling like a goofy child). Luce advanced towards him and lowered herself down. He could smell her pussy on all sides, and he gladly kept his tongue in place while her hip jiggled around. "That's good. You see?"

"Well, yes," he said, disengaging himself. "Do you want me to lick here? Do your rules allow it?"

"Sure. As long as your tongue stays close to where you first made contact, you can move your tongue all you want. After all, your tongue has to move, no matter where it happens to be. The rules for angels are very

reasonable … and they can be …" she shivered lightly as his tongue found another sensitive spot … "very relaxing." She looked down at him, smiling, lost in a daze, ready for any kind of pleasure.

"I'm getting excited," Stephen said. "Let's do it now or I'll go crazy."

"Okay, but don't use your hands," she whispered and settled back, lowering her pussy over his cock. As they got used to the sensation of being so close, he looked into her eyes and saw a girl eager to make him happy. Their needs were equal; she wanted to feel him deep inside of her; he wanted her to go faster. "Oh!" she said, wincing in surprise and giggling.

"Did you like that?" he said.

She laughed again.

"Wait," he said.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"Nothing… It's just hard to keep you in position if I can't use my hands."

"Oh, right," she said. She changed position and sat on his lap, grabbing his arms and wrapping them firmly at her hips. "Remember, your hands cannot move one centimeter unless I move them for you."

"Whatever," he said, wishing she'd stop talking and keep fucking.

His hands remained on her hips as Luce lowered onto him and started rocking. She seemed to be searching for a rhythm; when she found it, she sighed and laughed, tossing back her head. She was so absorbed in the intricacies of sensation that she had almost forgotten about him. She breathed harder; her hair bounced up and down as she rode his penis, lost in self-caresses. Moments later, Luce bent over to kiss his face, excited and anxious for more passion. Savoring the moment, he embraced her, stroking her hair.

Everything stopped.

She immediately removed herself from him. Then she started to remove her wings and put them inside her bag.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She gazed sadly at him, almost afraid to talk.

"Wait – are you leaving?"

"You touched me … you said that you wouldn't."

"Come on," he said, laughing, "I've been playing the game like a good boy all night."

"You don't understand," she said. "The moment you touch me is the moment I have to leave. And we were so close."

"You're joking."

"No," she said. "Our love has failed tonight. The angel must do all the touching."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"And I'm sorry you do not understand," Luce said, now completely dressed.

"It was an accident," Steve said.

"I know," she said. "Maybe I should have explained more."

"Well, can we try again some other time?"

"Of course," Luce said. "Next time will be better."

"Are we still having breakfast tomorrow at Jim's?"

"You can assume that," Luce said before leaving.

"10:00?"

"Your angel will be there," Luce said, closing the door behind her. Seconds later, she poked her head in again. "Don't forget: I want pancakes and bacon."

Steve and Luce had been sleeping together for only two weeks; it was good but slightly disappointing. Their first evening had been a special experience, but they were both incompetent at giving pleasures. They tried again, with better results.

Then, to mix things, she appeared at his door in a negligee and angel's outfit. The game had been fun but exasperating. He hadn't expected her to leave like that. But the next time was okay. He couldn't call it a master-slave relationship; she wasn't trying to enslave him, and he wasn't just being obedient. He loved her. This was a just a sweet and innocent game (even if it seemed strange). It was almost as if she were afraid of being alone with an aggressive male. When he surrendered his freedom of touch, she gave him everything: attention, secret kisses and all sorts of physical pleasures.

Another evening, they lay quietly on the bed, contemplating their happiness.

"You are amazing," he said.

"Steve. I hope love means more to you than a few orgasms."

"Of course," Steve said. "I'm a lucky man to be with you."

He tried kissing her, but she pushed back playfully. "No, no, no."

At first, he wanted to pursue it, but didn't want to spoil the moment. He wasn't mad, just frustrated.

"You've already given your virginity to me," he said. "Why are you so stubborn about not letting me touch you?!"

She laughed and put her finger gently around his penis. "Be patient."

"I have been," he said sternly.

"Are you disappointed with my caresses?"

"I didn't say *that*," he said. "I just wish both of us could play by the same rules."

She took his hand and held it to her chest. "Please don't condemn this game. Regard it as a kind of test."

"I shouldn't have to pass any test for you," he said.

"Of course not," Luce agreed. "But it can show how to adapt your desires to the other's needs; that brings better understanding about the nature of love."

"That's ridiculous – don't you think I understand you well enough? "

She took his hand and kissed it. "That requires time. We shouldn't rush."

"Fine," he said. "Let's dawdle. I don't mind dawdling. I could dawdle for an eternity with a beautiful woman like you."

"I am not a woman. I'm an – "

"An angel. Yes, I keep forgetting."

"Thank you for understanding," she said. "The rules will help us in the long run."

He laughed. "That's feminism." But in fact he had no complaint. This game was fun and pleasurable. When a woman gave long luxurious blow jobs on request, he knew better than to freak out about a few eccentricities.

Luce kissed him. "Feminists annoy you, don't they?"

"Not if they are as fucking beautiful as you are," he said.

She broke up with him in September three months later.

It was his fault, totally his fault. He had cheated on her. It was dumb of him.

"What I can't understand," said a male friend, "is why you would cheat on Luce. Isn't she like perfect?"

"I know," he said. "It was a stupid fucking mistake."

Because he and Luce had the same circle of friends at school, when the news of the breakup came, most people took sides (against him). He was treated like a social leper. For months after it happened, he hated Luce; he thought she was trying to humiliate him publicly in front of his friends. Later he realized that he was just imagining things; Luce had just ignored him and moved on to other boyfriends.

It wasn't the sexual infidelity itself that horrified her, but the fact he had even been tempted by another desire less beautiful and profound. Their love had been perfect – even he admitted that; there was lust and orgasms and thrills; how could he have found that inadequate? She had given her entire self to him. His cheating meant that he never took love seriously and never appreciated her devotion. She did not understand that sexual desire caused people to do stupid and risky things. If she acknowledged that love and sexual desire were not always the same, she would have to discard her

romantic notions about life. And that was scary.

He had tried to explain to his friends the circumstances of his infidelity, but even his best friends were unsympathetic. Yes, he had loved Luce, but he didn't really know what love was. 80% of it was his fault, but 20% could be attributed to circumstances. During that summer, Luce went to Bologna to stay with her uncle, while he stayed at his parents' house in St. Louis. He found a restaurant job where (as luck would have it) he met a girl from high school. Not just any girl, but Rosalie Morales, the talented actress who had won an acting scholarship. She was two years ahead of him, and they had been on the same cast for their high school production of *Grease*. She played the lead character Sandy Dumbrowski, while he was a Kenickie gang member who had only five or six lines. It was funny; even though the production was three years ago and he had only a minor role, Rosalie could still quote most of his lines. Amazing. She was so cute and talented; she still was. During high school, he had had a crush on her and hung around her after rehearsals. But she treated him like a juvenile, which in fact he had been.

Most of the restaurant workers were older or went to different high schools; Steve was the only familiar face to Rosalie. During work she made no secret about how she despised this job; she danced gleefully through the restaurant, making funny faces, singing random lines from *Grease*, imitating customers behind their backs. The two of them spent slow days swapping college stories and reminiscing about high school. Finally, he asked her out. Originally he had suggested a movie, but they ended up going to a play which her friend had free tickets for. The play was a bore (it was a series of ironic monologues about the myth of Michael Jackson); Rosalie's eyes rolled in mockery several times; clearly she shared his opinion. Afterwards, the friend who had provided the free tickets invited them to the cast party across the street from the theater. Five minutes after arriving, Steve felt out of place, but Rosalie seemed perfectly at home, chatting about acting classes and making polite remarks about the play to the director. Rosalie had this natural ability to charm people; she began singing some famous Broadway melody, and after a while two cast members joined in, as though this were some magical Broadway play.

It was easy to kiss Rosalie at the end of the night. She was very affectionate. On later dates, they went to all kinds of crazy places around St. Louis, a city he had always thought boring. They went dancing in Grand Center several times (something he *never* did). But Rosalie was a natural. He knew she was just performing in front of others and loved being the center of attention. But it was gratifying to know that the hottest girl in

the club was with him. It wasn't love, but simply lust and excitement. Outside of the club, he kissed her several times, a little more intensely each time. In the car, he groped all over her. They were like noisy animals. Finally, after he made her sigh and laugh, she held him back for a moment to catch her breath. Then, in an exaggerated Southern accent, she said, "Well I do declare! It is getting hot in here!"

The next time they saw each other, she invited him to her flat. Her parents were out of town for the weekend and he was ready to take full advantage of that opportunity. Twenty minutes later, he was in her bedroom, removing clothes, taking out condoms, putting it in and feeling her squirm. Even though it didn't last long, all the time he thought, I can't believe I'm doing with it Rosalie Morales … Sandy Dumbrowksi, god, it was like fucking a porn star. After he came, they told a few jokes, ordered a pizza and went in the living room to watch TV. Two hours later, they did it again, but it was getting late, and he had to leave. He drove him thinking, I can't believe I got a chance to fuck Sandy Dumbrowksi! He remembered how she looked with her eyes closed, twisting her shoulders and holding his head while he licked around her clitoris. Her orgasms were a series of melodramatic sighs, followed by helpless laughter.

The next few times at work, she acted coolly towards him. Affectionate, but leaving no sign they were romantic. He was dying to tell somebody (and to brag), so he told his best friend Tom who didn't believe him. Once Tom stopped by the restaurant, so Steve introduced him to Rosalie. "Tom doesn't actually believe I'm your boyfriend," he said to her.

"Don't put words into my mouth," Tom said.

"Steve's a good guy," Rosalie said.

"And boyfriend," he added helpfully.

"Well," she said, pretending to think about it. "It depends on what you mean by boyfriend."

"Ouch!" Tom said. "That has to hurt."

"No, I didn't mean *that*," she said, laughing. "Steven is a good boyfriend. And yesterday Carlos was my boyfriend. And tomorrow it will be Mark and the day after tomorrow it may be Tom."

"Whatever," Tom said, whirling his finger in the air to indicate her craziness. After his friend left, Rosalie snapped, "Steven you are such a wiener. What we do in private is nobody's business."

"But I thought –"

"I told you about Danny at Carnegie-Mellon. You can't seriously expect me to give him up just because of a summer fling."

"A summer fling?"

"And you have that Italian girlfriend, what's her name?"

"Luce."

"You and me; we were just having fun. Deep in your heart, you know that. This ain't love." Then she started singing, "*Summer dreams ripped at the seams, But oh, those summer nights ...* "

After that, Rosalie hung around him less often; she even seemed to make a point to talk to other men. She wasn't really trying to make him jealous; she just wanted to demonstrate the point that they were not an exclusive couple. She didn't want to mislead him.

They went out once or twice more, but it wasn't like before. He kept recalling her phrase "just because of a summer fling." His heart went back to Luce. He had not forgotten about her... just put her out of his mind. She had been writing semi-regular emails. She and her uncle had been travelling around Eastern Europe and so she was always on the run, mentioning random details ... mountains he had never heard of, food he had never tried. He wasn't much of an email writer, but when he wrote, he avoided saying too much about his summer. It is best to explain certain things in person. He looked forward to seeing Luce again ... none of those mind games, just a good sweet girl with traditional views about romance.

It was a warm reunion at school. Steve listened quietly while Luce showed him photos from her Europe trip. He couldn't concentrate; he couldn't get his hands off her. No sex games, just a simple fuck which lasted no more than 20 minutes. Luce was the same, just as sweet and passionate. Looking back, he realized that he never should have told Luce about the summer fling (even though he felt obligated to do so). When he started talking, Luce looked shocked. She began crying. He had never meant to hurt her ... just to come clean.

"And you had the nerve to sleep with me again as though nothing were wrong!"

"I'm sorry," he said. He tried to explain, but she wouldn't let him finish. She was disgusted. She didn't even want to hear his apologies. "What bothers me most is that you let me go through the summer believing nothing was wrong. Don't you think you owed that to me?" She laughed cynically. "It's obvious that you never took our love seriously... To think, I had been in Bologna happily talking about you to my uncle when you had already abandoned me."

"I didn't abandon you. I just made a mistake ... a big mistake. "

"Am I supposed to look the other way?"

"I said I'm sorry. I said I wouldn't do it again."

"Oh, wonderful," she said. "Now that you're sorry, everything is ok."

"I understand your anger. I did not appreciate the consequences of my actions. But now I do. If I could go back in time and erase that action from my life, believe me, I would. Just give me a second chance. Luce, you're my angel…."

"Don't say that," she snapped. "Please … I don't know how to deal with this. I need time to think. I don't think I should see you anymore. I'm not even sure I could love you anymore."

"But –"

"You need to live with the consequences of your actions," she said and walked away. He called after her, but she continued walking. Later he tried several times to have a civilized conversation with her. But the wounds were too deep. When he tried to talk to her again, she would say politely (but firmly), "I just don't feel comfortable talking about it anymore," and walk away.

They had made love exactly seven times. Six times before the summer, and once on the night of the breakup (which didn't really count). In retrospect, their love had been perfect, if only he had realized it …

The rest of the school year had been horrible. Yes, he graduated and found a job. Luce had moved on, but had he? All he had to remember her by was a single photograph. On the night the photograph was taken, she was wearing her angel's wings and lying beside him, saying silly things into his ear. Then, on a whim, she jumped out of bed, grabbed her camera and started taking random photos using the night mode. She took a photograph of his penis (with her hand over it), another of his face while she caressed his penis. The camera continued clicking through the night; while they were fucking and she was rocking back and forth, she snapped random photos of their bodies in motion. He begged her to let him take a few photographs of her. At first, she said no, but after some cajoling, she lay on the bed next to him while he started snapping away.

"Can I take a picture of you sucking my dick?" he asked.

He had expected her to say no, but she happily put her mouth on his penis, while he snapped multiple photos. Then they switched; she lay over his head and took a picture of his head between her legs, smiling up at her as he wiggled his tongue in front of her pussy. Laughing, she took more pictures. Afterwards, when passion was spent, she lay next to him and they reviewed the pictures through the camera's viewfinder. The photos were embarrassing and hilarious. Most were out of focus. Even the photos of her beautiful nude body looked slightly awful. In one photo, Luce had a contemplative frown; in another he made a frown that reminded Luce of her grandmother. When they came to the shots of Luce's reclining body,

she groaned. "Oh, my god! I look awful!"

"Please," he said weakly, kissing her mouth. "You look gorgeous."

Silence.

"You kissed me," she said.

"So?"

"You kissed me! You broke the rules!" she laughed hysterically.

"Oh, that," he said, remembering the rules of angels. "I was paying you a complement. Doesn't that merit an exception?"

"You broke the rules!" she sang, "You broke the rules!" Luce started gathering her clothes and quickly dressed.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I won't do it again. By the way, did you want to go to the classical music concert tomorrow?"

"An angel never reveals her plans," she whispered and left the room.

The next day, a sealed envelope was slipped under his door. Inside was a single photograph, one of Luce's head taken from below. The photo was cropped so you saw only her shoulders, part of her wing and a sly smile. Along with the photograph was a handwritten note, saying, "An angel always loves you."

He still had the photo and the note. He still remembers that night.

A decade later, he was alone again after divorcing his wife of three years. He and Martha just argued too much; Martha couldn't tolerate disagreement; he was always in the wrong apparently. The more Martha scolded him, the more obvious their incompatibility seemed. The marriage started with a wonderful honeymoon in the Bahamas, and they played all kinds of sex games – even the angel game he played with Luce. But with Luce it had been a game of teasing. Martha used it as a way to exert control and even to punish him. Nothing was fun anymore. The love had died early in the marriage, leaving a constant feeling of irritation.

He was glad to be free from marital stresses, but it was hard getting used to being alone again. His thoughts reached further back … to Luce. That was a more innocent time. He still had the photograph; any stranger who looked at it might have thought it the work of an unremarkable and pretentious artist. But when he stared at the photo again, he remembered the night in question, the giggles, the sensual freedoms. Luce had been a treasure, and he had squandered it without appreciating his loss. He managed to forgive himself (he hoped that by now Luce had forgiven him too). They were young, and young people make mistakes. Painful mistakes.

Sex was no longer about woman or love. It was about porn and strip clubs and lonely people. Love was too enormous to think about.

At the time he knew Luce, he just wanted orgasms and fun, but as he

replayed those six nights in his mind, he realized it was as close to love as he would get. Luce had been his angel of love.

Sometimes she visited him in the darkness, standing at the door again, dressed in that same angel outfit.

"It's good to see you again," he said.

"Is it really ... good?" she replied. Her voice had no joy or eagerness. She looked older and wiser; her body had matured; it was no longer the body of a girl who played volleyball or visited discos on Saturdays. But it was just as radiant, just as seductive.

"Still, I appreciate it," he said. "You are welcome here."

"You always say that."

"Let's not be angry," he said. "I've always loved you. A part of you must still love me too."

"An angel's love never dies; it only withers away," Luce said.

What's the best way to love an angel?" he asked.

"There is no best way," she whispered. "All human love is imperfect and selfish."

"But if you are an angel," he said. "how can you know what humans feel?"

"Angels know many things ..." she said.

"If you do not abandon me, I can show you what human love is capable of."

"I have never abandoned you," Luce said. Her voice had an air of casual contempt. She removed her negligee and stood naked before him. "Do you have an erection?"

"Not yet," he said. "Come. Be with me. Put on some music. I've been waiting a long time for you."

"No music tonight," she whispered.

She slipped into his bed and curled her body around his, moving her fingers over his stomach. She did not look at him, but just rested her head against his shoulder. Their eyes met for a moment. He smiled, but she looked away and methodically began kissing his chest.

He felt totally passive before Luce. He could not initiate any touch – those were the rules; that seemed fine for a quirky college romance, but now that they were older, he longed for ordinary sex – no games. Letting another woman control the direction of his sexual passions seemed humiliating and almost perverse. Time was short, and they had already missed many opportunities for love. He wanted her to stay; he wanted to touch her, to assert his control over her and take her like any man took any woman. But he caught himself. Luce seemed to be looking for an excuse to

break it off; all she needed was a single inappropriate touch. But in fact, these encounters had been giving Luce satisfaction too. For every orgasm he experienced, she had experienced several. Her hiccups of pleasure were small and undramatic and not particularly joyful; when she came, she looked into his eyes and seemed to be crying. Moments later, she bent over and gave him a soulful kiss; it was as though they had achieved a tearful reconciliation.

She relaxed, and he could feel his penis slip out of her pussy again. The feathers of her wings brushed lightly against his shoulders as she bent down to kiss his cheek. He had not come yet, but that was okay; they were sharing a gentle rhythm and heading inexorably towards release; she looked into his eyes and moaned; it was the sound of innocence and joy and forgiveness. It was the Luce of his memories, the Luce of his dreams. Then – he didn't know why he did it – he held the back of her head and stroked her hair – it was only a second or two, but he immediately jerked his arm back. In that moment her body froze and her face contorted – as though a lightning bolt had electrocuted her heart.

– scurrying from the bed …

–grabbing himself and resuming the masturbation —

–cameras clicking —

– rapidly dressing —

Stroke, stroke, release.

Alone on the bed, he saw himself: a lonely, desperate man.

"It was a mistake," he called out to the shadowy figure dressing at the other end of the room. "I never wanted you to leave. I didn't know your rules."

"The rules are things I cannot change," she said.

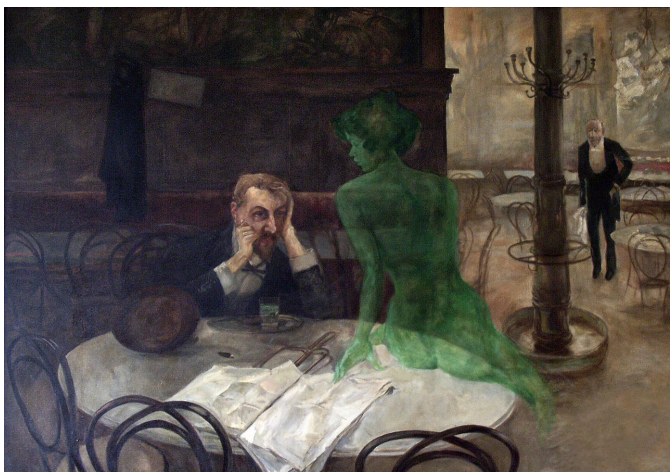
"There's no way I can obey them!"

"That's the real problem," he heard her say before disappearing. In the darkness he could still feel the curves of her breast on his skin, the feathery wings against his arm, the shudders of a woman weeping.

Before he wished for her return, the naked man remembered Luce's gentle face, feeling only hatred.

The Kinkiest Thing You Can Imagine

Has visiting a convenience store ever inspired your erotic imagination?



His first casual encounter was with Linda, a dark-eyed woman at a law school mixer. As the party drew to a close, he used a line that had failed on every other woman before; to his astonishment, Linda played along, and one hour later they were at his apartment, on the couch, undressing.

The more they kissed, the less they talked and the more probing their conversation of passion became. If he stroked her cheek, her hand would graze down his shirt like a little spider. If his hand slipped underneath her blouse, she'd nod and grab the back of his head tightly but lovingly. If he tried to unzip her pants, she'd laugh and say, "You'll never figure out how to do it."

"Watch me try," he said.

"No," she said, brushing his hand away." There's a trick." She unhooked a button and looped a knotted chord around the zipper.

"Oh, great, a chastity belt."

"That's good," she said as he lay his hand over her warm panties.

"Your chastity is safe in my hands," he whispered. "Is it safe to talk

about safe sex?"

"Sex is safest when you abide by the speed limit."

"I'll wear a condom if you like."

She smiled, and that smile – that discreet but lascivious smile – sent him reeling in anticipation. He excused himself to hunt for condoms in the bathroom cabinet, telling her to make herself at home. She made wisecracks about the decor (or lack thereof) while he tried to remember where the damn things were. Last year he had put a box here precisely for this kind of situation, and now they were nowhere.

"Your place is a mess!" she called out.

"I know," he replied, taking a single condom from his overnight bag. He had once stuffed it there with overoptimistic expectations. "I'll be out in a minute."

"Do you have cable TV?" she asked, and he heard her turning on the TV.

"Just the local channels." He tried tearing it open, but when he couldn't, he used a pair of tweezers to poke though. Unfortunately, he succeeded too well, puncturing the slimy bit of plastic. He cursed, threw the condom out and started searching for another. After a while, he slammed the cabinet shut and went out to tell her the news. Linda was sitting Indian-style and topless on his bed. "Hello," she said, proud of her licentiousness.

He embraced her, bringing her bare breasts against his chest, feeling her warm readiness. "You are beautiful," he whispered.

"Thank you," she said, "do you like my tits?"

"I do," he said, stroking the naked skin of her shoulder. "By the way," he said, "I can't find the condoms."

She laughed and gave him a passionate kiss. Then frowned. "Does that mean we can't do it?"

"Afraid so," he said. "Unless…"

"Unless?"

"Unless I run over to the convenience store across the street."

She lay back and curled over the sheets and started pretend-crying. "I don't know if I can wait that long."

"I beg you," he said, kneeling at her feet. "I'll do anything…"

"Anything?"

"Anything to make your stay a pleasant one."

"Make haste," she said, crawling beneath the covers. "Maybe I'll just take a nap." He turned around. "Can you pass me the dictionary?" He took the large brown book off the shelf and balanced it on her head. "Thank you," she said, flipping to a random page. "*Dirndl*: a woman's dress with a close fitting bodice and full skirt. *Disbosom*: to make known; to reveal. Are there

any words you'd like me to disbosom the meaning of?"

"Look up 'kiss,'" he said.

She flipped through the pages while he rebuttoned his shirt. "We have several kisses to choose from. We have *kissing bug*: a person much given to kissing. *Kissing gourami*: a whitish fish noted for the habit of pressing its fleshy protrusible lips against those of another." He laughed while putting on his shoes. "Is that your vacuum cleaner?" Linda leapt to her feet. "Wow! Did it come with all those attachments?"

"I don't know. I got it from my parents."

"Bill, it's beautiful," she said, choking with emotion. "It's a work of art. And yet I get the distinct impression that you're not giving it the love and affection it needs. Just look at this place!" She started rolling the vacuum around. "This vacuum needs time to roam around." She turned it on and started vacuuming, her half-nude skinny body dancing gracefully over the living room floor. He was about to leave when he spied her lovely figure in the wall mirror. He went up and pressed her to him like a vacuum trying to suck up a large rubber ball. They looked at themselves in the mirror amidst the vacuum's loud groaning.

"Linda, while I'm gone, I want you to think of the kinkiest thing you've ever wanted to do to a man. When I return, that's what we'll do together."

She looked deviously at him and resumed vacuuming.

He left the apartment in a delirium. Yes, he genuinely liked Linda. He didn't even know her last name or why she was at the party. It didn't matter. She was terrific. Terrific and sexy. Besides these mysteries enthralled him. With her, the usual introductory information seemed unnecessary, irrelevant, distracting. She liked playing games, and so did he (yet in his normal life he did it so rarely). The past three hours with her was an adventure with the allure of a potential conquest. He was seething with sexual desire this evening, and that was why it was so peculiar a moment to bump into the apartment maintenance guy. Here on the sidewalk, in the middle of the night, with a hard-on and unlaced shoelaces, he suddenly remembered his ongoing battle to get the broken door latch fixed.

"Hey, Jose," he said, "Didn't you say you were going to come by yesterday?"

Jose winced and began a long explanation in broken English."It's no time – manager asked me to – look at the foundation—no time for anything else. So sorry – "

"That's okay," he said. "I just don't like leaving the key under the matt."

"It's the doorlock?"

"No, the latch to the patio door. It's stuck." (He mind wandered to Linda strolling about the living room).

"Tomorrow I have off, but I can do it Monday. That okay?"

He thanked Jose and walked down the sidewalk to the store. How strange! He'd been unable to reach Jose for the last two days, and now the guy appears out of nowhere. Jose was a bumbling man with a funny-looking moustache. Linda would find him hysterical.

Considering the hour, he thought it strange to see four cars crowding the store parking lot. A delivery truck was preparing to unload a cartful of bakery goods, and a policeman was filling up a cup at the soft drink dispenser. A teenage girl in a leather jacket was outside using the payphone, and he smiled at her as he walked into the store. He thought about his last words to Linda: think about the kinkiest thing you'd ever want to do. If somebody had suggested that to him, he wouldn't know what to say; there were just so many possibilities. Even in a convenience store there were enough props to do almost anything. Just walking down the aisles gave him ideas. There was maple syrup (he could rub it down her buttocks and thighs), ice cream (scooping it on her lips and over her tits), a bag of ice (he could toss it on her in the middle of the night), and beer (after pouring it over her body, he could lap it up as excitedly as a dog after a long walk). There was the old reliable banana (nice to stick up her you-know-what and lick up the mushy remains), the dirty magazines (she could reenact the same raunchy poses and even be ordered to buy the magazines herself). The store didn't carry whips and chains (it was a family establishment), but it had a fly swatter and dog leashes (to lead her forward or strap her down). He would love to go outside to the payphone, call her and whisper all the obscene things he wanted to do. Or better yet, he could pay the teenage girl to call Linda up and say the very same things. He'd love to bring Linda here and wait in the car while she disrobed before the cashier and security cameras (it could start a trend; instead of robbing convenience stores, people could strip in them). They could drive around town stopping at only the stores with the best-looking male cashiers. He could accompany her inside and caress her shorts in an inconspicuous corner in the store. They could linger in the store all day and rate the sexual desirability of every customer and later fuck each other pretending their partner was the customer with the highest score. He could take over the cashier's spot for a night and have her sit underneath the counter sucking his you-know-what when customers weren't around. He could microwave hot fudge and pour it over her as though she were some magnificent banana split (yes, with the same banana from before). Or he could stick his

entire you-know-what in the hot fudge jar and create a brand new confection. He could blindfold her, ask her to open her mouth and alternately cram his you-know-what and an ice cold fudge bombsicle into her mouth. Or he could bring a fudge bombsicle outside the store, unwrap it, place it near his crotch, ask her to kneel down and suck it slowly while humanity watched. He could masturbate into a cola can in the restroom and later watch her drink it in full view of customers. He and she could at alternate times go to the store restroom and do the wild thing while sad souls came in to buy lotto tickets, pay for gas and get money at the cash machine. They could drive a car with tinted windows into the parking lot and do all kinds of fucking while unsuspecting customers pass by. She could walk in and buy groceries with a miniature vibrator humming away inside her. She could introduce herself to a male customer, hand him a survey describing a variety of sex positions and ask him to mark the ones her boyfriend should do to her that evening. Or after pleasuring him with her mouth, she could walk across the street with the fluids in her mouth, swallowing only to say "thank you" when the cashier hands her the receipt. She could enter the place in shorts and no bra and pretend to faint in front of a handsome store cashier. He and Linda could pretend to be strangers and arrive separately, and then in front of customers he could offer her money for sex. Or outside the store, she would accost male customers and ask for money to buy condoms (explaining that it was part of a truth-or-dare game). He would watch this from his car, and they would not make love until she had found a generous man. They could buy a razor and shave their pubic regions clean (okay, that was dull). Using a series of products bought here, she could become his personal servant, giving him private baths, shampooing his hair, washing his body, applying a touch of aftershave and using the hair dryer to comb his hair to perfection. After buying a stick of incense and lighting it, they could make love without climaxing until the stick had completely disintegrated. He would ask her to shoplift something minor (a candy bar?), slip it inside her panties while nobody was looking (nothing was sexier than making love to a doer of illicit deeds; but what if she were caught?) He could buy a pair of dark sunglasses and make her wear it whenever they made love. They could use lottery tickets to determine the frequency and variety of their passion. They could assign a secret sexual code to all the numbers, and do whatever acts correspond to the numbers they scratch off. They could go together into a convenience store and purchase every single condom off the rack. He could buy a candy pack to use as a series of rewards whenever she pleased him in bed. He could hide semi-obscene messages under store

products and refuse to make love until she found them. He could rent a security guard uniform, catch her shoplifting and frisk her until he discovered the pilfered item (a candy bar perhaps?) Perhaps he could handcuff her and take her away. He could buy a pack of little cinnamon candies and lay a trail of them over her erogenous zones and lick them up one by one. The same could be done with whipped cream, but this time, she'd be applying it onto him, and she'd have to lick up every last drop. Or they could park in a pickup truck out of view from the cashier, do it lying down in the back and hide under blankets every time a car drove beside them.

He paid for the condoms and walked home gleefully. He hoped Linda didn't mind the wait. Perhaps she was busy indulging in her own erotic reveries. For every erotic notion that came to his mind, Linda must be dreaming 99 others. Now he could finally act out those kinky scripts he had composed long ago. For once (and for the first time) there would be two restless imaginations to play with.

The first thing he saw upon returning was the vacuum standing upright in the corner. Its chord was wrapped neatly around its vertical frame. The bedroom door was shut, and Linda made no reply when he called her name. Disrobing, he fit the condom over his prized possession and knocked on the bedroom door. "Linda," he said. "Are you decent?" Silence. He laughed, deciding to play along with this game of hers. He opened the door and went over to the empty bed. "Linda?" he whispered, half-expecting her to jump out from the darkness. He switched on the light, whipped open the closet and checked the living room before realizing that Linda, the girl of his dreams, had slipped away.

Lisa disparages one night stands ... while admitting to having succumbed to its allure. (**Read more**)

The Good Pussy, the Bad Short Story

A woman shows her husband an erotica story
she wrote; how will he react?

Truly the moon has not become her face,
Nor two lotuses
Transformed into her eyes,
Nor her slender body formed from gold.
But his mind deceived in this way by poets,
Even if still understanding the truth,
The body of doe-eyed women, just skin, flesh and bone,
a stupid man will worship.
Bhatri-hari, Passion, 46

The other day my wife surprised me by handing me some pages she printed out. "Here's an erotica story I wrote," she said. "I want you to have it."

"Thank you," I said. "When did you write it?"

"Last week."

I tossed the pages onto my desk and returned to my email.

"You are … planning to read it?" she asked.

"Of course," I said. "Not this minute though. I really need to finish this presentation."

For a moment Jenny seemed annoyed, then she walked out of the room to make a telephone call. Jenny was always instigating new bedroom games and forwarding articles about spicing up your love life. Much as I enjoyed all these new things, it could be a bother sometimes.

Seriously, I was swamped at work. Until Monday's presentation was over, I would be unable to think of anything else. Friday night we were supposed to go to a block party – did I really have time for that? But no. Jenny insisted. Commitments, commitments! Maybe I'd find a spare hour this weekend to read the story. Who could predict?

Saturday was full; the line was long at the oil change place, and I spent a few hours driving around town to find a memory card adaptor. (Yes, that's my typical weekend.) When I returned home at 3:30, I was determined to read Jenny's short story; I even took the pages and brought them to bed, but as soon as I started to read, I fell asleep. When I awoke, it was 5:30 already; Jenny would be home in an hour. She taught a photography class during the afternoon, and usually did food shopping afterwards. I picked up the first page. As I started reading, I remembered that I needed to watch last week's episode of the *Office* before Jenny returned. We were going to watch the one hour season finale together that evening, and I was one episode behind. I turned on the TV and watched the show. It's the episode where the boss arranges a basketball game. Hilarious.

At 6:00 I went to the bedroom and started reading Jenny's erotic story. Reading the story took 15 minutes (it was ten printed pages). After finishing, I reread it to make sure I didn't miss anything. I didn't want her quizzing me about it. Jenny liked writing and was an English major at college. She even kept a online photo-journal which I checked every few weeks. She dabbled in everything with the same degree of passion; she was always showing me her latest creations – an opinion piece about Iraq, a photo of a grasshopper, an article about reducing energy consumption, a poem about her mother. Lots of emails, lots of URLs. Years ago she showed me some stories ("prose pieces" she called them), but this was her first erotic story.

I was curious and a little worried. At first, I wondered if I'd recognize myself in the male character. Did the story contain some veiled message about our relationship? But no, it was nothing like that; the story was about a warrior who seduces a princess and promises to return after battle. Then he dies. It was okay, I guess. There was a sex scene and it was explicit – she mentioned "*putting his manhood into her mouth*" and "*feeling his body convulse, his hard cock spasm*." I retched at a few descriptions (*"His scent reminded her of their rides through the forest – leather saddles, grassy hills and*

gentle spring breezes.") I might have found it interesting if there were autobiographical details or weird attractions or kinky transgressions. But no, this was Jenny. She kept an open mind about sexual experiences and never hesitated to express a kinky thought (if only to remind me of her naughty potential). But deep down (we both knew), her erotic inclinations were conventional – and not in the least bit scandalous.

The erotic story itself was tame and predictable…even boring. I knew she was a decent writer; I knew about her (almost limitless) passions. I knew she read great books and had great dreams. But was this the best she could do? A princess? An imaginary warrior? The cliches were dreadful, the prose was overwritten; the plot and dialogue were contrived. The story lacked insights into sensuality; it didn't even have a playful sense of amorality. Did she find this type of man exciting – stupid muscle-bound men who were easy to figure out, horribly rich and courted women with phrases from greeting cards? When we were making love, did she mentally replace me with the man in her story? I wasn't so much threatened by this fictional lover as dismayed that my wife could find him so attractive. I suppose Jenny would find my own fantasies about high school cheerleaders or submissive interns or bisexual women simple-minded as well, but at least I didn't take them seriously. When the two characters mouthed cliches (*"What day will you return?" "The day my heart finds true happiness"*), they did it with such earnestness. How on earth could Jenny find *that* to be sexy?

And then there was her pussy.

That was a part of Jenny I adored. The first time we had sex I had expected to give her a gentle introduction, easing her into the kinks of the male imagination. But once her sensual inclinations were unleashed, I became the one needing instruction. The rest of my life (I realized) would be devoted to understanding the variegated erotic impulses that shivered through her body. They were far more complex – and powerful – than my straightforward male horniness. She wanted love…she needed it…she depended on it and yet providing it was no easy task; it required effort and intense concentration and patience. Her desire was not something I could read like a manual; it was moody and temperamental and easy to misinterpret. It was not merely a matter of lavishing the right amount of attention in the right way; every occasion was different; I had no guidebook to follow; I went exploring through her passions as though it were the first time.

Once we were at a company-sponsored barbecue at an outdoor park with 150 people we barely knew. After I introduced her to my boss and

helped to unload food from his car, I saw Jenny mingling with random people. She was smiling and laughing politely, looking at me with a restless expression. That look was subtle and easy to miss; certainly no one around her would have recognized it, and earlier in our relationship, I wouldn't have either. It was a simple movement of the eyes, a nervous twitch, a slight look of exasperation. Its message (as I interpreted it anyway) was an invitation to sex, a sudden awareness of the body's naked needs. But when she saw me, she saw a way to mollify these desires, a way to be satisfied without compromising respectability. I was all hers: a person whose spigot could be turned on and directed at will. These erotically-charged moments came and went, but they reminded me that her life revolved around sexuality just as much as mine did.

I leaned on her shoulder, stroked her neck and said in a low voice, "Do you…want to do something else?"

She looked up at me and said, "What?" She searched my eyes for a moment, and then smiled impishly. "Okay … give me a minute." I released her hand, and Jenny went to the front desk to grab a to-go plate covered with plastic wrap.

We walked side-by-side towards the field that served as a makeshift parking lot.

"Do you want to be fucked?"

"Yes," she said without embarrassment.

"Say it."

"I want to be fucked."

"Do you want to make love or do you want to be fucked?"

"To be fucked," she said, following the script.

"Do you want to make love or do you want to be fucked?"

"I want to be fucked," she repeated more firmly.

"Again."

"I want to be fucked." By that time, we had come to our van, and she laid the carefully wrapped to-go plate on the front passenger seat.

I sat on the back seat and said, "Come back here." She closed the door and climbed back. We were now behind tinted windows, sitting inside a minivan at a grassy parking lot, surrounded by empty cars, invisible to the world. She crawled into the van, and I bent her across the seat, giving her a few moments to unbutton her jeans before I pulled them down. My hands were immediately upon her – everywhere – finding every place she could be touched. And I touched her – keeping her spread open while I took her – again and again and again.

Afterwards, I whispered "I love you" into her ear, and she laughed; both

of us knew this fuck had nothing to do with love. All this … provoked by a simple raising of an eyebrow at a picnic.

Jenny was a woman who not only complied but was compelled to comply; it was her nature; she needed to demonstrate her willingness to be used (and yes, even abused) not just by me but the impregnating forces of life itself. It was not enough to assert she was mine; I had to make her mine; I had to own her, possess her, use her and hold her without letting go. I had to be both master and slave, the one who acknowledged her erotic inclinations (no matter how hidden or perverse). Most importantly, I had to love her – 100% of the time, always, no matter what.

I could talk about the occasions in which making love didn't quite work or where the coupling was unremarkable or routine. Though we made love often (we were still newlyweds), our batting average wasn't particularly remarkable; one of us wouldn't be in the mood, or it would become tedious, or we'd approach the moment and never quite make it, or our minds and hearts would race elsewhere – was she thinking about past boyfriends? A student? The price of cantaloupes? For all I knew, she could be stewing over something I had said, yet when we made love we were in a state of truce, making simple demands and yielding to them in silence.

At other times we were ready to leap into passion. Once, we had just finished a marathon of making love. We had been trying to have children for almost six months, and today she was apparently at the peak of her fertility. The evening was all ours, and not only was there sex without guilt, there was guilt about *not* doing it. If I wimped out that evening (I remember thinking), she'd probably kill me.

But no, everything had been fine. A dinner out, a casual walk around the neighborhood, and then a slow walk into passion. I was excited and horny; we were ready to jump into bed, but our delays were deliberate. We wanted the candles, the negligee, the fifty song playlist. We wanted to want it; we didn't just want an ordinary fuck; we wanted one to put all previous fucks to shame. We wanted beauty and tenderness, patience and skill, acrobatics and a world which was completely ours (at least for that night). It began with a few scattered caresses, moving quickly to consummation. First and foremost Jenny wanted a baby, but she also wanted to unwind and achieve her libidinous potential; she wanted to love me and reveal the depth of her love. She was my dinner guest, my porn star, the mom of my future children. Together we were a couple, a family, a pair of interlocking body parts, a secret debauched duo. Lying together felt like we were starring in a play, performing roles we had been rehearsing for years. We had already mastered the cues and gestures and vocal

cadences, but each occasion had to seem like the first time.

After I came, the pace slowed down, but everything was not over. Jenny was responsive and energized and hungry. There was no denying it. I gave her a few letdown kisses, but she clearly wanted more; this woman would keep me up all night. I held her close while stroking her pussy. She moaned softly, but seemed on the verge of another orgasm. I sat up and rolled Jenny on her stomach.

"Jenny, I have a favor to ask." Jenny smiled and looked up. She was used to the way I referred to the kinkiest desires as "favors."

"What?"

"I want you to give yourself an orgasm. And I want to watch."

Upon hearing that, she was relieved, having half-expected me to suggest some bizarre fetish or bondage game. Just masturbation … she could handle that! Lying on her stomach with her face inches away from my penis, Jenny slid her hand underneath and began moving her hips. She looked servile, ridiculous, and incredibly sexy. She waddled up and down while watching me with a stupidly happy smile. Every few seconds, she would hit a new spot of satisfaction, sigh momentarily, and resume her waddling motion in my lap. She started climbing to a climax, and right before she reached it, I jerked her hands away.

She cringed. But I didn't care; I held her wrists firmly and gave her head a kiss. Then, leaning back, I put my cock before her mouth and said, "suck."

She began decorating my cock with kisses. By this time I was physically spent. No matter how long and hard she would try to bring me to orgasm, there was no way physically that could happen. I knew this, but she did not. I just wanted to watch her compliance. This evening, I realized, was not about my desire but hers. Clearly her body was still wound up by the interrupted climax, and yet she continued kissing my dick, unwilling to assert any right to pleasure. For her, the night wasn't about pleasure; it was about giving oneself up to love.

I released her wrists and said, "Are you ready for an orgasm now?"

"Okay," she said sweetly.

"Are you going to ask permission before you come?"

"What?"

"Right before orgasm, ask me if you can come."

She started to caress herself, at first slowly (she seemed to have misplaced that previous desire), but once she found it, she began stroking herself vigorously. In no time at all she whispered, "Can I come?"

I looked into her pleading eyes while I stroked her cheek.

"Not yet," I said, grabbing her hand away again. For the next minute I held her, giving her cheek a light stroke. Her eyes remained closed; desire was still bottled up inside her. But she laughed.

"Are you ready to have an orgasm?" I finally asked.

"Yes!" she said, sick of all these questions.

"Are you going to ask permission before you come?"

"Are you going to say no?"

"Start masturbating, and then you'll find out."

She picked up where she left off, requiring almost no time to reach maximum excitement. "Can I come?" she said. And when she asked it, she slowed down, looked up and waited for the go-ahead. But I said nothing. "Matt, can I come?" she said, picking up the caresses. I kept my hands over her neck and rubbed her cheeks.

"Matt..." she said again, her voice trailing off. Her body released a noiseless sigh and fell into a state of relaxation. Even my kisses were an unwelcome distraction.

A minute later, she had returned to my world again, laughing and saying, "Did you enjoy that?"

"Of course. Are you ready to do it again?"

"Uh-oh," she said.

"I want you to give yourself an orgasm. And I want to watch."

Jenny looked at me as though she though I were kidding. "If you insist."

She resumed her movements, fatigued but lubricated enough to keep going. I made her kiss my penis and watched her advance and retreat, up and down, sighing. She closed her eyes and smiled as she concentrated on pleasure. Every so often, she'd open her eyes and look up, laughing to herself, a woman who knew she was both beautiful and loved. Her breathing became labored and – when she reached a certain point – completely quiet. For a good ten seconds, not a noise came from her, not even a breath, then she gave a loud whimper and a melodramatic sigh. Afterwards, she seemed oblivious to my presence; she had even forgotten to ask my permission to have an orgasm. But I didn't care. She was happy with the world, and so was I.

She nuzzled into my lap and I whispered again, "One more time please."

She laughed as I gave her another kiss. "I might need a while," she whispered.

"Take as much time as you need."

"Can you...give me a little help down there?"

I moved my hands over her pussy, but I didn't want to take the lead; I wanted to see how far she would go, how far she would last. I wanted

desire to ooze from her – not because I willed it but because she willed it for herself.

"Jenny," I said, "do you love me?"

She laughed. "I'd love you more if you help me out a little!"

"You'll manage." I rested her cheek against my penis and offered several encouraging caresses.

Jenny looked up and tried valiantly to find her place again, stopping and starting a few times, hobbling back and forth. By now, desire was not so effortless; Even the touch of my fingers failed to electrify her skin. She looked into my eyes wearily; she would not give up, no matter how unreasonable my demands; for her sexual love was a challenge, and she was eager to overcome it. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her motions, testing, struggling, achieving. I held her head against my lap as she struggled to climax, sighing, settling into a state of tired satisfaction.

We kissed again, and I stroked her cheek. Jenny was purring contentedly, and I thought, should I ask once more? Did I dare? She had not yet refused me. Would she ever?

I took the hand she had been using to caress herself and kissed it, inhaling the secret odors of her arousal. This was the beautiful pussy that consented to my lewd propositions. I continued kissing her hand, bringing it to my heart.

That was a year ago. Tonight we were trying to recreate the same magic, trying to overlook the petty annoyances of living together. Now we were making love to forget, to purify.

"Did you like my short story?" she said to me afterwards.

"It was interesting," I said.

"What – you didn't like it?!" she said.

"Of course I liked it. It was you. I love you – and everything about you."

"But for a moment forget that you are married to me. Would you still have liked it?"

"That's hard to say." I said. "I can't imagine not being married to you."

"Suppose you came across the story in a book or magazine. Would you have liked it?"

"Well, I'm not much of a reader," I admitted. Jenny looked at me, waiting for an answer. "Of course I liked it. It was beautiful."

"Thank you," she said, giving me a hug. "That's all I wanted to hear."

"When are you going to finish that children's book – the one about the talking shoe?"

"Oh *that*," she said. "Funny you mention it. I thought that … "

My answer had been a lie … a painful lie. It wasn't her story – just her –

which I found beautiful. That story was nothing to me … just words on a page. You can't kiss a prepositional phrase or a charming bit of dialogue. On the printed page, a female character could flirt and charm, but she would never suggest weekend outings or give random gifts (like a short story). On the page, a character could be outgoing and sexually open, but she would never sense what bothered you or made you happy. On the page, she could produce orgasms with ease, but her passions would never catch you by surprise or make you curious. On the page she could laugh or sigh, but to your ears, there would only be silence.

A pussy – Jenny's pussy – was something I could touch and feel; I could notice changes in her body, her temperament, her voice. When I stroked her hands or ran fingers through her hair, she treated it as nothing unusual; Jenny was more than an aesthetic idea; her appeal came not from lewd kisses or sexual gymnastics but incidental sarcasm and minor thoughtful gestures. Jenny was a jumble of unpredictabilities; she lacked the formal certainty of a Rembrandt or the playful elegance of a Mozart symphony. Yet she was my inspiration, the provider of endless epiphanies. Jenny and her pussy stayed in my heart longer than any Shakespearean metaphor. Her pussy was neither poetry nor prose; it did not have a voice, only inclinations: it responded, it embraced, it shuddered. The words in Jenny's story conjured *something* – that was undeniable. But when viewed on a piece of paper in Times New Roman font, these sexually-charged words seemed unremarkable, unrefined and even silly; it just didn't compare with real life. In the bedroom, when we made love, I gazed into her eyes, searching for her dreams. In the last paragraph of her story, the princess reads the dead man's letter, recalling the last time they made love. The female character weeps. When I read that, I felt nothing (though Jenny probably expected me to find it moving). That emotional moment in the story was important to her – but meaningless to me; no, I was the wrong audience for this story – but if I couldn't be persuaded to like it, who could be?

After reading that short story, I almost wished it never existed. It complicated things. If I didn't enjoy her erotic stories, would somebody else? – did I mind that? With stories the problem was communion between reader and writer; how much of this experience was really being shared? But when Jenny and I were together in the flesh, this empathetic enjoyment flowed naturally; orgasms were relatively easy to cause and recognize. When I put my hand on her pussy, she laughed; when she kissed any part of my body, I felt enormous relief. I wasn't trying to be a critic or judge her sexuality; I was only giving back what she had given me.

"It is much easier," I observed, "to love you than to love a short story."
"That's what you think," she said, tossing a pillow at me.

Do erotica stories really need a plot too? "Don't confuse sexual tension with dramatic tension," Lisa warns. (**Read more**)

The Reluctant Lover (for Male Readers)

(If you are female, you should read this story before reading this one).

One night, when they were in bed, she confessed her most secret sexual fantasy.

At first, he just laughed, but as she spent a good 10-15 minutes describing the fantasy in detail, he realized it was clearly something that she had been contemplating for a long time. He was dumbfounded … even appalled. She had always seemed so sweet and innocent. Yet her fantasy seemed weirder and kinkier than anything he had ever imagined.

"You may think I'm joking," she said. "But I'm not…."

"Yes, I realize that," he said.

"I just thought it would be good to spice things up in the bedroom department."

"Wait – do you think there is a problem with our sex lives?"

She paused three seconds and chuckled. "I had wondered if you would react that way," she said.

She wanted – She wanted him to –

"How did you become interested in *that*?" he asked.

"I read it in a book. And then I googled it on the Internet. I was too embarrassed to do it in real life. But since we are comfortable in our relationship, maybe now it's time to try it for real. "

He wanted to know more, but she brushed off his questions with vague words and a kiss. Then she talked about trying it for real on Saturday (three days from now).

He couldn't believe her idea. Was she kidding? He knew that certain people had these kinds of fantasies, but he never expected his girlfriend to be one of them. Variety in the bedroom was great, but acting out this kind of fantasy was crossing a line. Was he ready for that?

"If you have a problem with it, I understand," she said. "But trying new and naughty things can be good for our sex lives."

"Maybe it's one of those fantasies that is better to contemplate than to actually experience," he said.

"Oh, don't be such a baby!" she said. She enjoyed calling attention to the fact that before they dated, she had more sexual experience than he did.

"I'm not a baby. I'm totally open-minded. That doesn't mean I have to agree to everything you suggest."

"Oh my god! What are you worried about? It will be fantastic," she said laughing. "You're complaining now, but we both know that it will give you an instant hard on. You will be ready to come in no time."

"You assume many things," he said.

"That is true, but I also know what turn you on," she said.

He paused. Would it really be so bad?

"If it means so much to you," he said, "I guess I won't object."

She clapped her hands like a giddy child. "That has totally made my day."

"I'm sure the next time I propose some new erotic fantasy, you'll be fine with it too."

"Maybe," she said.

He grabbed her arm playfully and said, "What do you mean, maybe?"

She giggled, removed his arm and teased him with another kiss. "You're adorable," she said and went into the living room.

For the rest of the night, they talked about the fantasy some more. He was just being nice, but he noticed how much she liked talking about it; just talking about it turned her on.

But he wasn't enthusiastic. This was her fantasy – not his – or theirs. It was making him uncomfortable. But after getting over the initial shock, was he so opposed to it? Not really. If it meant so much to her, why not

indulge her? He was aware that she was using her charms to manipulate him. In a way, he hated it, but still found it arousing. Making her happy was something that came easily and naturally for him. He liked seeing her enjoyment. He craved her orgasms. His lust for Kristi went deep; watching her act on sexual impulses was a major turn on … no matter how kinky. (That was why anger from their quarrels always dissipated, and how she always managed to persuade him to attend social functions which usually bored him.) Sometimes he wondered if what she called "love" was simply her appreciation for his efforts to please her. Was she taking him for granted?

He guessed that trying it once would be enough for her to get it out of her system.

He had no idea where this strange fantasy came from. Was it something from childhood? He knew that deep down, this desire of hers had nothing to do with him. On the outside, she seemed polite and caring, but in private she had a nasty and mean side. It was his curse (or privilege perhaps) to appease her deepest psychological needs.

The thought of it crossed his mind again … and even disgusted him. At least, he wouldn't need to think about it until Saturday.

But Saturday came. In the morning, when he was eating breakfast, she walked by and whispered into his ear, "Are you ready for tonight?"

"Sure," he replied, trying to hide his nervousness.

"Everything is arranged. This is going to be great," she said.

"And what if it isn't?"

"Oh … attitude. I like it. Getting a little worried?" she said, stroking his ear playfully.

"Maybe," he said. "But I have only one question."

"Tell me."

"----------?"

(*For more information about the last line of this story, click here*).

The Reluctant Lover (for Female Readers)

(If you are male, you should read this story before reading this one).

One night, when they were in bed, he confessed his most secret sexual fantasy.

At first, she just laughed, but as he spent a good 10-15 minutes describing the fantasy in detail, she realized it was clearly something that he had been contemplating for a long time. She was dumbfounded … even appalled. He had always seemed so sweet, so sheltered. Yet his fantasy seemed weirder and kinkier than anything she had ever imagined.

"You may think I'm joking," he said. "But I'm not…."

"Yes, I see that," she said.

"I just thought it would be good to spice things up in the bedroom department."

"Wait – do you think there is a problem with our sex lives?"

He paused three seconds and chuckled. "I had wondered if you would react that way," he said.

He wanted – He wanted her to –

"How did you become interested in *that*?" she asked.

"I read it in a book. And then I googled it on the Internet. I was too embarrassed to do it in real life. But since we are comfortable in our relationship, maybe now it's time to try it for real."

She wanted to know more, but he brushed off her questions with vague words and a kiss. Then he talked about trying it for real on Saturday (three days from now).

She couldn't believe his idea. Was he kidding? She knew that certain people had these kinds of fantasies, but she never expected her boyfriend to be one of them. Variety in the bedroom was great, but acting out this kind of fantasy was crossing a line. Was she ready for that?

"If you have a problem with it, I understand," he said. "But trying new and naughty things can be good for our sex lives. "

"Maybe it's one of those fantasies that is better to contemplate than to actually experience," she said.

"Oh, don't be such a baby!" he said. He enjoyed calling attention to the fact that he was older and more sexually experienced.

"I'm not a baby. I'm very open-minded. That doesn't mean I have to agree to *everything* you suggest."

"Oh my god! What are you worried about? It will be fantastic." he said laughing. "You're complaining now, but we both know that it will get you wet in no time. "

"You assume many things," she said.

"That is true, but I also know what turn you on," he said.

She paused. Would it really be so bad?

"If it means so much to you," she said, "I guess I won't object."

"Great, that's awesome," he said. "I knew I could count on you."

"I'm sure the next time I propose some bedroom game, you will be fine with it too. Or better yet: maybe you will keep the kitchen clean for a change."

"Maybe," he said.

She grabbed his arm playfully and said, "What do you mean, maybe?"

He laughed, removed her arm and teased her with another kiss. "You're adorable," he said and went into the living room.

For the rest of the night, they talked about the fantasy some more. She was just being nice, but she noticed how much he liked talking about it; just talking about it turned him on.

But she wasn't enthusiastic. This was his fantasy … not hers … or theirs. It was making her uncomfortable. But after getting over the initial shock, was she so opposed to it? Not really. If it meant so much to him, why not

indulge him? She was aware that he was manipulating her tendency to be agreeable. In a way, she hated it, but still found it arousing. Making her man happy was something that came easily and naturally for her. She liked seeing the animal way he took his pleasures. She craved his controlling touch. She felt instinctively attuned to Scott's hungers; watching him act on sexual impulses was a major turn on … no matter how kinky. (That was why anger from their quarrels always dissipated, and why he usually managed to persuade her to attend boring sports events). Sometimes she wondered if what he called "love" was simply his appreciation for her efforts to please him. Was he taking her for granted?

She guessed that trying it once would be enough for him to get it out of his system.

She had no idea where this strange fantasy came from. Was it something from childhood? She knew that deep down, this crazy desire had nothing to do with her. On the outside, he was a soft and gentle man, but in private he had a selfish and controlling side. It was her curse (or privilege perhaps) to have to appease his deepest psychological needs.

The thought of it crossed her mind again … and even disgusted her. At least, she wouldn't need to think about it until Saturday.

But Saturday came. In the morning, when she was preparing breakfast, he walked by and whispered into her ear, "Are you ready for tonight?"

"Sure," she replied, trying to hide her nervousness.

"Everything is arranged. This is going to be great," he said.

"And what if it isn't?"

"Oh … attitude. I like it. Getting a little worried?" he said, stroking her ear playfully.

"Maybe," she said. "But I have only one question."

"Tell me."

"----------?"

(*For more information about the last line of this story, click here*).

Was the Door Locked?

A visit to a newlywed couple's apartment provides hints of sensual escapes.

The couple sat across from me slurping spaghetti noisily. The dinner turned out to be better than the conversation. That surprised me; it had been five months since I'd last seen Martha, and now she was treating me almost like a stranger.

"The meatballs are excellent," said her husband Albert.

"Thank you," Martha said, dipping garlic bread into the sauce.

"Spectacular," I agreed. "Just like Stefano's."

Martha smiled at the reference. Stefano's was a dingy restaurant she and I frequented in sophomore year. The food was horrible, and we went mainly for the late night coffee. "I should hope not," she said.

Albert laughed, unfazed by our cryptic jokes. Martha and I shared many, going back to high school (years before she and Albert met in Paris). The saga of Martha and Albert started out as a study abroad romance lasting two semesters. When the year was over, he returned to Amherst; she to Trinity. Then, after a month's worth of desperate letters and a

telephone marathon that ended with a proposal, she announced to her Trinity friends that the man she was marrying was someone we'd never met.

I saw her husband at the wedding (of course) and even shook hands with him on the receiving line. Five months later, a job interview in Oklahoma City and Martha's offer to let me crash on their couch provided the perfect opportunity to learn more about her husband. They had already accomplished the unfathomable; they had bought a *house*. The place looked nice although unpacked boxes were everywhere and none of the furniture had permanent locations.

Five months of marriage seemed to change Martha's outlook. Her hospitality seemed rushed, quaint, anxious. She had the smile of one already adjusted to paradise and now was ready to move on with life. The transition from college graduate to wife made her more sedate, less excited by things, more willing to laugh at things not that funny. She viewed me as she viewed her entire past: with friendly interest mixed with a suspicion I would distract her from the paradise that was her marriage.

I once was in love with her. Once. Now I was simply in lust with her in a friendly, good-natured way. Do attractions to people ever disappear? I was susceptible to her airy laugh, the fluid way she moved her hands, the open affection she showed when meeting people for the first time.

Still, I couldn't help trying to find in her marital behavior some external sign of sensuality. We were all sexually repressed in college, Martha especially. She shied away from flings and the momentary thrill of closeness at dances. She even avoided dinnertime conversations when the sexual banter become too explicit. At such moments I almost felt embarrassed on her behalf. She leapt into marriage quickly and wholeheartedly; it hinted at some hidden passionate sensibility which surprised us all. At the wedding it was a shock (though a delicious one) to see her kissing the groom, to see her lips covering his so enthusiastically. That was a rare moment of public passion. But it submerged as quickly as it had appeared. I had heard how Muslim women covered their faces to heighten the mystery. I had always been tantalized by the veil wrapped around married women I knew; it was the veil of sensuality, of sexual companionship, of female desire that is gratified yet hidden. Its allure was irresistible.

At about ten thirty, Martha announced she was going to bed. Though she may very well have been exhausted (having to get up early the next day, etc), the premature end to the evening surprised me. For all the time I'd known her, she never went to bed early. Some of our college study sessions

didn't even *begin* until eleven. Going to bed so soon was a dangerous anomaly, a sign that marriage was draining her of energy she once possessed in abundance.

After Martha went through a series of yawns and stretches on her way to the bedroom, Albert mentioned that he too felt kind of tired and planned to retire early. At first, I was amused at the near simultaneity of their announcements. Then, in a flash, I understood. For them, "going to bed" wasn't merely a solitary recuperation from the daily exhaustions; it was a retreat into the naked company of someone willing to shield you from loneliness. Martha's words, "It's time to go to bed," and her simple authoritative tone recalled the simplicity of a mother's admonition. It stressed the banal, the routine, the unremarkable. But here the meaning was inverted, made pleasantly ambiguous. That was the beauty of the statement: the striking resemblance it bore to innocence. As if sensuality could be so easy to talk about! I was startled and envious. I even felt the victim of a slight dishonesty. For them, the declaration of going to bed was a subtle signal, a benign expression of a hunger that would keep them up all night. And most of all, "going to bed" was a decision – mutually agreed upon – to enter a secret marvelous world that shut outsiders away.

I wanted to be part of that world. Or if not that world, then some other magical world I'd never been able to experience. Nothing was wrong with the spartan bachelor's life, but I wondered if a secret companion could ever change me, if the insertion of another loneliness into my own could ever ease my situation. Later, after the newlyweds disappeared behind the bedroom door and I settled into a Spanish novel on the couch, I felt alone, ignored, unknowable.

The sound of a bedroom door locking can be one of the most thrilling sounds to a young man's erotic imagination. I must have been asleep a few hours when I heard it, the careful, clandestine twisting of a latch in the darkness. I couldn't say what was more surprising: that I could hear the click, or that someone should be twisting the lock at such a strange hour. But I heard it. And I listened more attentively, in the futile hope of hearing moans or sweaty limbs pressed together. No other noise came. It kept me awake, much as in my own apartment I used to lie in bed wondering whether I had really locked the front door. Sometimes I was too tired to worry about it. At other times I would be unable to concentrate on anything (not even sleep) until I certified that yes, the door was locked (nine times out of ten it was). Of course, my apartment had nothing worth stealing, and I hardly worried about burglars. My anxiety had less to do with safety than an unconscious need to close things off, to define

boundaries between inside and outside. I was afraid that one morning I'd find the door wide open not from foul play but carelessness.

I pondered the paradox of nakedness, the misfortune that Martha's nakedness was meant only for her husband's eyes. No amount of fantasizing on my part could equal an actual glance of her naked self, not a glance furtively-gained, but one received and acknowledged openly. She remained in one room; I in the other. The only nakedness known to me was my own. Female acquaintances became incomplete versions of a naked woman known to me only through imagination. Compared to this abstraction, the population of women reminded me of colorful veils used by magicians to suggest shapes of objects never underneath them in the first place.

The twisting of the lock became for me the erotic link between the bedroom and the living room, between the two people locked in carnal embrace and the curious outsider. It was a way to protect me from the sight of marital love in its starkest, most obscene configuration. Surely Martha and Albert trusted me. Surely they thought me mature enough not to snoop or barge in unexpectedly. But the possibility of that event, admittedly ludicrous, was still a possibility requiring preventive countermeasures.

How could I be sure that what I heard was not a door locking but a door unlocking? By the time the door was unlocked, Martha and Albert might have already exhumed the body of their marriage, given it a thorough examination and reburied it without leaving a trace. Were the barriers between the two adjoining rooms as absolute as I had supposed? Or was I only imagining? Was nothing really hidden from me? For the rest of the night, I pondered a question which has stayed with me to this day: was it locked? Was the door locked?

*****

A variation of this story adopts the perspective of someone already inside the bedroom. Martha's perspective is perhaps more interesting. In five months of marriage, she had grown accustomed to conjugal kinkiness without being bored of it. But tonight was different. Albert's caresses had an unusual aggressiveness. She guessed it to be the result of some primitive masculine need to demonstrate control over her in the face of a male guest asleep on the living room couch. She found the game enjoyable. To recognize the cause of her husband's behavior was to see the child in him, the child she sometimes adored (and sometimes merely tolerated). So

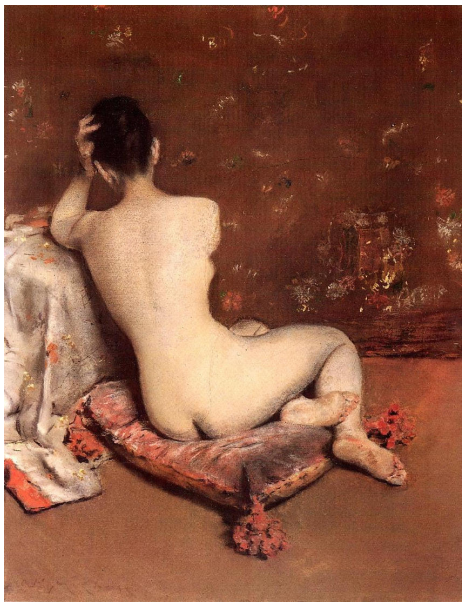
when Albert interrupted the caresses by standing and wandering around the dark bedroom, she was not afraid, just curious.

"What are you doing?" she whispered. Albert said nothing. She repeated the question a little louder. Instead of answering, Albert went to the door and twisted the lock on the doorknob. The gesture made no sense. What was he planning? Wasn't the door already locked? He stood naked by the door. Suddenly she became aware of the way she filled the bed with her nakedness. What was he planning? The situation reminded her of movie murderers who lock the door before moving forward to strangle the victim (a strangling depicted not by images but by the victim's futile cries). Albert's locking of the door offered the threat (and excitement) of danger, vulnerability, control. She feared it and anxiously awaited it.

But then, couldn't he have gone to the door to *unlock* it? There was danger in that too, but a danger more subtle, more ambiguous. If the door were unlocked, it could be quickly whipped open, painting a stripe of light across her body. An unlocked door offered the threat of interruption and public exposure. Albert moved away from the door and lay in bed again, penetrating her with unrelenting energy. She wrapped her arms around him, whispering, "Did you lock the door? Is the door locked?" He didn't reply but chuckled as he kept diving into her. She kissed him and looked into his face, finding the maniacal expression of a man convinced that love never met resistance.

The Revolting Breast

A man lusts after a beautiful woman. Years later, he meets her again, determined to sleep with her. Is it too late?



Lianna and Matt ran into each other several times over the years. This story is about the time he tried to fuck her.

They first met at a reception. Lianna served as volunteer coordinator for a local charity, and she had organized the event to show appreciation for contributors and volunteers. It was an odd assortment of people; compared to the donors and other full-time volunteers, Matt's involvement with the charity had been minimal. He had helped to migrate the charity's website and handled some minor troubleshooting. He had never actually met Lianna before; they exchanged several emails and talked once by telephone. The only thing he remembered about it was that Lianna hated technological things and was relieved to have him do it.

The refreshments were nothing special, but Lianna turned out to be a young and pretty woman whom he lusted after in a lazy and generic way. The way she giggled as she announced upcoming charity events was silly and sexy. Lianna belonged to the class of women already spoiled by male attention who never noticed the random geek. All he could do was shake her hand and dream about the orgasms she must have had with her boyfriend. She was too young for Matt anyway. Did Lianna even remember him? Even though Lianna was involved in multiple conversations, Matt jumped in to introduce himself. Surprisingly Lianna remembered him and gushed about his contributions to the audience. Matt added that he had also graduated from Southwestern University (something Lianna mentioned in her speech). Southwestern was a small school, and it was unusual to run into another alumnus. Lianna was delighted at the connection and said she graduated in 1996 (so that made her … 28? Just 5 years younger). They talked for a while about teachers and college traditions, but it was evident that their respective experiences at Southwestern had been radically different. He had majored in philosophy while she had studied international business; she had belonged to a sorority that did social work for the city, while he just read sci fi novels and played intramural basketball.

Because of that slight connection (and his attraction to her), Matt wanted to keep in touch. The next day he sent her an email about a possible tweak to the website. Would she be interested? A few days later, she wrote a reply saying "That would be great!" A few days later, he forwarded an article about some methods for fundraising on the web (a topic surely of interest to nonprofits). Two weeks later, he heard about a local alumni function for Southwestern which he passed along to Lianna. He received no reply and indeed, he never saw her until two years later at another alumni function. Lianna showed up with a fiance, mentioning that she was thinking of going to graduate school. Matt mentioned a new consulting business he was trying to start. It was a strange and awkward conversation; he wondered if Lianna had any inkling how attractive he had always found her.

He totally forgot about Lianna until years later when he saw her in the lobby of his office building. He almost didn't recognize her. She was conservatively dressed and rushing off somewhere. She looked more confident and reserved and serious than he remembered. And despite the years, she still was striking to look at; that was undeniable. He did not actually say hello. (Would she even remember him?) He worked as a network technician and spent most of his time going offsite to set up

networks and phone systems. He passed by her office several times a day and saw her sometimes in the parking lot. Finally, he decided to get the meeting over with – if only to avoid social awkwardness. So the next time he passed her company's office, he stuck his head in and asked for her.

The receptionist pointed towards a door, and he knocked.

"Come in."

He found Lianna in a small office poring over documents. For a second he wondered if he had chosen a bad time.

"Lianna, I noticed you in the parking lot and wanted to say hi. I'm Matt, the webmaster who helped you out at Kidsworld."

For a moment, Lianna didn't recognize him, but the word "webmaster" made her smile in recognition. "Matt, it's nice to see you."

"Is this a bad time?"

She waved her hand at the papers on her desk, making it clear that even though she was very busy, she was glad to take a break. They didn't talk much. She had just started this job a month ago; she had finished a law degree and was now working as a compliance officer at a financial services company. He told her a little bit about himself and how he had bought a fixer-upper in Hyde Park, started a consulting business and was now planning a trip to Peru. Lianna, he noticed, wasn't wearing a wedding ring. They chatted only for a few minutes – and he realize how out of place he was in a law office wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Lianna didn't mind, and he invited her to lunch in the food court two blocks away. "They have a great Indian vegetarian restaurant," he said.

"Funny. I wondered if it was any good."

They exchanged cards and he promised to call her on Tuesday or Wednesday about lunch. After it was over, he was glad he had taken the initiative. Not seeing a wedding ring made him wonder if Lianna was divorced. He would have gladly pursued her, although he had to proceed cautiously. He had misread these situations before, and besides, it would be good enough just to have a lunchtime companion once in a while.

The next week he called her as promised.

"Perfect timing." she said. "By the way, can my friend Darlene come along?"

"Sure," he said. Ok, now he was sure he had misread the situation. But when he stopped by at 12:30, Darlene (whoever she was) had already left for lunch, leaving just the two of them.

The walk down the street was pleasant, and it was nice catching up. Once she got away from her desk, Lianna relaxed. Though they barely knew one another, she treated Matt like an old friend. She wasn't especially

eager to talk (that was odd), but she offered more biographical details; her marriage lasted had only 5 months (Bob was hopelessly immature for his age and stayed out late drinking). She almost laughed while describing him, as though a divorce were just another comic misadventure. She quit her job and moved to Houston for law school, then returned to Austin for her job. She was glad to find a job in her hometown (it took a while, she said), but living in Austin wasn't the same; the city wasn't half as fun as she remembered.

He wouldn't say Lianna was flirting, but she seemed to enjoy his company and the opportunity to unwind about her life. She was still attractive though certainly not the knockout he remembered. Sure, she had gained a few pounds, so what? Matt wondered if just becoming a lawyer had altered her perspective. The youth and enthusiasm he had once seen in the upbeat volunteer coordinator had been swallowed up by the lawyer persona. Her professional self almost seemed dull … maybe on weekends she was more relaxed. Despite the fact she was unattached, she treated this outing as nothing more than a professional meeting. Perhaps that's all it was. What would she be like after work? In bed? He had no idea.

He knew the old Lianna was inside and he still wanted to know her; she was still charming in her own way. But he was different too. He wasn't as talkative or prone to laughter; he could be sincere and not feel the need to make wisecracks. He enjoyed his life … even though he missed the tenderness and excitement of a relationship. Yes, he could admit that; it had been several years since he held a woman in his arms; he almost forgot how it felt to love and be loved. Nothing was wrong with him, and yet he couldn't help feeling that he was missing some valuable aspect of life. A serious relationship wouldn't solve his problems; if anything it would complicate his life (which by now had settled into a familiar and soothing routine). When he talked to Lianna at lunch, he realized how much he missed having someone to talk with on a regular basis. Lianna was still pretty in his eyes – no, she was gorgeous. Her personality had definitely changed, but he could deal with that; it was exciting to be in her presence.

As they ate, he tried to gain insight into the older Lianna (and into himself as well). Like him, she seemed to have accepted her lot in life (though it bored her). At first, he thought Lianna's negativity resulted from her boredom at eating lunch with him. But she seemed to appreciate his invitation, if only to escape the office. Maybe she wasn't feeling well? Was it that time of the month? Was she having personal problems?

Eventually they found a topic of interest to both of them. Futuristic books and movies.

"It's always interesting to see how people envision the future," Lianna said, "even if that vision turns out to be ridiculous. Futuristic movies say a lot about the biases and obsessions of the time period they spring from."

"*Purple Cloud*," Matt said. "Have you read that one?"

"I haven't had time to read futuristic fiction for a while – or any books really," she said. "I'm worry enough about making it through the week."

"Yes, I know what I mean. When I was 7 years old, I wanted to be an astronaut; now that I am 42 all I want is to be 7 again…"

"It's easy to grow tired of the genre," Lianna said. "Everyone has such hopeless visions of the future. Famines, space aliens, genetic engineering. I wish sci fi novels didn't always have to be dystopian nightmares."

"It would probably be boring to read," Matt said.

"It doesn't have to be interesting to be readable. Novels offer freedoms you don't find in movies. No need for special effects – just an imagination and proficiency with words."

Matt had just intended to bring her to lunch, but as time went on, he began to wonder if he should try to ask her out. On their way out, he mentioned a few potential outings: concerts, movies, plays. There was even a sci fi film opening tomorrow which she might like. She didn't respond one way or another. That was not a good sign. Later he regretted not inviting her point blank. What did he have to lose? Or was it too soon? It wasn't necessary to go on opening night, but the first night of anything promised excitement and anticipation, especially when surrounded by teenagers eager to be the first in a city to experience something. Neither of them was too old to forget youthful thrills, but bills and daily chores made it hard to be spontaneous anymore. Every so often a person needed something new or unexpected, even if the final result was still disappointment.

After returning from a meeting with a client, Matt stuck his head in her office and asked pointblank if she wanted to see the sci fi film tomorrow night.

Lianna politely declined, explaining she had work to catch up on. "I understand," he replied. "Maybe next week."

Lianna hesitated, then she explained that her schedule for next week was completely full (and might even be full on the following week). She spoke carefully and precisely, as though she were under oath and didn't want to divulge too much.

The rejection caught him by surprise. It was absolute and seemed to offer no future possibility. She didn't even thank him for the invitation. He had thought they had reasonably good rapport during lunch, but now it

was clear he had miscalculated; there had been no rapport, only politeness, no sexual attraction, simply fulfillment of a social obligation.

"If your schedule changes or if you change your mind, let me know," he said before leaving her office.

"Ok," she said noncommittally.

As he drove home, he cursed himself for asking her out so soon. Why didn't he allow more time for them to get acquainted? No, this friendship was doomed from the beginning. He was man enough to admit defeat.

Later, that night, he received a phone call from Lianna. It surprised him. Lianna was the last person he wanted to hear from. But her mood seemed cheerful. At first, he thought maybe she had changed her mind, but instead she offered an explanation for her abruptness. It was a stressful time for her. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer three weeks ago and would be having a double mastectomy on Monday.

"I don't want you to get the impression I'm rude; I just have a lot on my mind now," she said.

"Obviously," Matt said.

"I'm not keeping my condition secret, but it's not the kind of thing you spring on a person when you first see them," she said. "So don't take it personally. The next few months will be hard to plan for. I have no idea what I will feel like next week or the week after."

It took a while for the news to sink in. At first Matt was shocked, then he started asking informational questions which only led to more question. Chemotherapy? Biradial what? Sentinel lymph nodes? Tamoxifen? CT Scans? He realized that Lianna was swimming in an ocean of medical details, frantically trying to stay afloat. It was as if she had just learned she would be living on a remote island and had to take a crash course in the natives' language. Earlier today Matt had been obsessed with trying to update his flawed romantic history with the help of this woman. Now, he saw that romance must have been the furthest thing on her mind. They only talked for 20 minutes, but it was enough to make his romantic aspirations seem petty and ridiculous. He couldn't get over it. Breast cancer? Lianna was 37? Not only close to the end of her fertility, but one step closer to death. He couldn't accept that. Even at her age, she was still beautiful. There were still several years left for lonely men to lust after her.

After that conversation, he searched the Internet for information about breast cancer. What exactly did it mean to be "Stage 3"? He glanced at the survival rates and the side effects of various treatments. The websites featured stories by breast cancer survivors and suggestions for dealing with side effects. One photo showed the breasts of an anonymous and

faceless woman. One breast seemed to be nothing more than a large misshapen crater. He was not squeamish about looking at such photos, but tried to picture this damaged body with Lianna's face on it.

The next morning he dropped by her office and repeated his invitation. "Going to a movie will get your mind off things."

"I'll be fine," she said. "My mom and sister will be flying in on Sunday to keep me company."

A paralegal interrupted them to ask for a file. After Lianna handed it to her and said, "I have a lot to do before I go on medical leave. "

"I can imagine," Matt said.

"When does the movie start?"

"Seven."

"That's early," she said. "Can't we just stop by a cafe instead?"

Around seven o'clock they met and walked to 6th Street, which was already full of people.

"Do you date a lot?" Matt asked.

"Not really." She said this with resignation, as though this fact made her a little sad, but it was a minor sadness in the grand scheme of things. "I certainly won't have time for a lot of things this year. Each day will be a challenge. Do you know that chemo is supposed to trigger early menopause – soon I'll be a postmenopausal woman." She laughed. "It seems so absurd."

"Yes," he said, marveling at how healthy she appeared.

"After the diagnosis," Lianna said, "nothing seems the same. Even this job doesn't seem important. Ok, I need the health insurance. But I no longer care about the same things."

Students crowded around club entrances, talking and laughing. At one club, more than a hundred youngsters stood waiting in line. Lianna smiled, vaguely remembering a time (not so long ago) when she walked down 6th Street without a care. Matt and Lianna felt older, no longer able to enjoy youthful pleasures so carelessly.

Eventually they spotted a cafe with a free table and sat down.

"I have been thinking about what you asked yesterday," Lianna said. "What do I care about? I care about my dignity. I care about how friends will remember me. I care about fighting against a disease as best as I can. All humans die someday, but I'm sorry; I can't imagine not being here ten years from now. Even if I'm sick, I still have so much capacity for enjoying things. I have books to read and movies to watch. I'm not even talking about the joy of meeting new people or watching children grow old. I've never been to Europe or the Grand Canyon. I've never taken a ballroom

dance class or learned Photoshop. I can still do all these things."

"I agree," he said. "Cancer won't prevent you at all." Yet her need to point this out only reminded them that time was dwindling (not just for her but everyone), and that goals now required extra effort.

"Just think," Lianna said. "The next time I come here, I'll be bald and wearing a wig. By the way, I tried on a few wigs at the Wig Factory. A few look halfway-decent." She flipped open her camera phone and showed him a photo of her posing with a short brown wig.

"With all the strangers on this street, nobody would notice if you were bald ….or even topless…."

"Maybe not topless," she said with a laugh.

He had hoped to get her mind off the cancer, but the subject had infected her mind as well. That's all she talked about. He didn't mind really, but the preoccupation was unhealthy. Today (and maybe tomorrow and the next day), she *was* breast cancer. It had become an unavoidable part of her. In a way the cancer had humanized her by making her seem defective and fragile. Although she was a good person at heart, she barely asked about his life. Like it or not, cancer had already become her boyfriend, and that seemed wrong.

"Let's go down this block," Lianna said. "There's a magic shop somewhere."

They walked along, peering through the windows – a furniture shop, a jewelry shop and then the magic shop. Instead of going in, they peered at the items in the store window.

"Suppose you didn't know you had breast cancer," I said. "Would you enjoy tonight any more?"

"I don't know," she said. They walked down a sidewalk for a minute before she spoke. "Of course, I don't really know you either."

"Do you want to know me?"

She laughed. "Not a good time to ask psychological questions."

"Why?"

She looked into another shop window and continued walking. "I don't want to do any more navel-gazing than I need to."

"Do you want me to treat you like a sick person?"

"That is the reality, I'm afraid."

"The trick lies in trying not to act sick. Pretend."

"I remember when I used to feel like you," she said. "The only thing I used to care about was finding good coffee or a date for the weekend."

He took her hand and kissed it. She looked at him blankly.

"Is this why you asked me out – so you can kiss me?"

"One of the reasons."

"Sorry, I'm not in the mood for any of that," she said. "You have to realize that on September 18 my life totally changed."

"That was when you learned the news?"

"Yes. Let's cool it for a while. My emotional state is too raw."

"I'm sorry."

"No, that's okay. It's not your fault I'm sick. Let's just walk," she said. "No need for kisses."

"You probably don't want to hear this, but I'll say it anymore: even today you still look very pretty."

"Thanks, I guess." she said.... "Beauty is so unimportant to me right now."

"It is still important to me," he said... "A man is always drawn to physical beauty."

"After a while people appreciate inner beauty more."

"Both are important."

"I'm not exactly looking for a man to sweep me off my feet at the moment."

"Aren't you focusing too much on your cancer? "

That remark annoyed her. "I don't need anyone telling me what I should be focusing on."

"Does breast cancer mean that a person can't fall in love?"

"Golly," she said, turning away. "How long have I known you? A week? I've having major surgery. I'm losing important parts of my body. Maybe a guy can't appreciate what I'm going through. It will take months or even years to recuperate ... assuming that I even survive .... Not only will the chemotherapy make me crazy and weak and nauseous, for a while my bodily fluids will be considered hazardous material. I'm not even going to talk about my hair falling out. Most people have menopause in their fifties; I will have it before my 40th birthday! I'm ready for this battle, but I can't be distracted by men who think I ought to chill out and fall in love."

"Fine. Just tell me what you want to do tonight."

"I want company. I just want to forget. I just want to look around."

"That's fine. But I don't think you should reject other people just because you're sick."

She threw up her arms in disbelief. "Haven't you heard anything I've said? I'm not looking for a boyfriend right now. Do you understand that?"

"Maybe you mean what you say and I should respect that. But a week or a month later, aren't you going to wish you didn't reject this opportunity so hastily? Wouldn't you have wanted to give it a chance?"

She paused. "You don't understand. For the next year or so I can't even think about dating anyone. It's out of the question."

She walked ahead in silence. She seemed both angry and sad, confused and determined to hide her fear. Matt felt exasperated. Anyway, it had been unrealistic to think he could fall in love with such a woman so quickly.

"Okay, let's forget about it," Matt said. "What do you want to do, sit down?"

"Let's just walk."

They walked around a small courtyard and sat on the bench, watching people go by. After a while, they resumed walking and slipped into a small club where a blues guitarist was playing. The man was incredibly talented; after he ended his guitar solo and the band joined in, everyone in the crowd roared with delight. Lianna was barely interested but stared ahead uncomfortably. Eventually she turned to face him; Matt could see anxiety on her face, a sadness she had been trying to hide but which the music had uncovered. The music had not been giving her joy (even though the musician was outstanding). As the music drowned everything out, they looked at each other; she looked so nervous and helpless, as though she were a bug aware of how easily she could be crushed. More than anything he wanted to help, but his efforts were making her angry. It was stupid; a few days ago he thought Lianna a striking and charming woman, but now she seemed bitter. Yet there was dignity in her suffering and even a beauty Mark found irresistible; he could not take his eyes off her for even a second.

He motioned for her to leave the club, which she did. "Do you want to walk back to the office?"

"That would be nice," she said, and they walked in silence. At a red light they noticed a car full of men with greased hair and leather jackets; perhaps they were going to a fifties costume party. They were arguing loudly about directions, and as the light turned green, two men in the back seat started kissing passionately. Matt found it amusing, and when he glanced over at Lianna, he saw that she did too.

"Have you ever been to the Oasis?" he asked.

"The restaurant on Lake Travis?"

"Yes, have you ever gone there to see the sunset?"

"No, but I wouldn't mind doing that."

"We could go tomorrow if you like."

She considered the idea. "Tomorrow I have to clean and pick a few things up. Maybe I can finish everything by late afternoon."

At the parking lot, he leaned over and gave her a small but deliberate

kiss. She did not object, but did not seem to find it pleasing either. Perhaps she allowed it just to be rid of him. Or maybe she was acknowledging that a single kiss was unlikely to do much harm. Or maybe she wanted to prove to herself that her sickness had not closed the door to future possibility of romance.

The next day he picked her up at 4:00. He didn't know how her mood would be after last night or whether he had taken things too far, but Lianna was fine – and even cheerful. They arrived at Oasis early enough to find a choice table to view the sunset. While they drank tea and munched on appetizers, the subject of cancer never came up. Instead they talked about irrelevant things; friends at Southwestern, space elevators, the best way to eat pomegranates, crazy parties at law school. For the first time it felt like a date and they were rediscovering adolescent amusements. But this was not about childhood. It was about trying to forget the world of doctors and chemotherapy and death. They were pretending. At the same time, he was drawn to her. She looked perfectly healthy and even more attractive than he remembered. He wanted to fuck her. It was terrible to phrase it like that, but as soon as he admitted this desire (despite the cancer and consequences), his thoughts turned to … when?

After the surgery and chemotherapy? That would be next to impossible for the next few months. During his frantic attempt to learn about breast cancer two nights ago, he read about the various sexual problems facing breast cancer survivors. After treatment, even if she were physically ready, it was doubtful that she would be emotionally ready. Could he deal with the reduced (or nonexistent) sexual contact? He was sexually starved as it was. Breast cancer wouldn't remove this desire for her; it would just involve more work and possibly be less central to the relationship. He could see Lianna's own alienation from her body; it was as if she wanted to disown it. Yet until Monday morning those breasts were still hers.

John couldn't help feeling that a window of sexual opportunity was closing. But Lianna didn't care; she was almost anti-sexual. No, that was not fair. She was just reacting to circumstances. As a patient she would constantly be needing help. If he loved her, he would have to embrace this neediness – even if it was less to give pleasure than to lift her from pain.

Every kind of love is accompanied by an emotional burden, but usually this burden was a hypothetical, too far in the future to worry about. And really, was he that desperate? There were lots of other nubile women to meet. He and Lianna were still at the introductory stage; he could walk away and stay casual with little emotional damage. Yet the odds of running into another woman like Lianna seemed low; what if he never did? While

they chatted at the Oasis, he tried to imagine what intimacy with Lianna would be like. The mental act of undressing a woman (which had always been a secret source of delight) was now an attempt to imagine the ugly disaster of cancer. He pictured Lianna totally bald and with bandages instead of breasts. He pictured her frail body naked on the bed next to him; he pictured her vomiting; he pictured trying to fuck a woman whose vagina was completely dry or whose crazy hormones suppressed her libido almost to the point of asexuality. It scared him. Deep down he knew he was capable of this kind of love even if wasn't ideal. He would be the first to admit that sex seemed less important than the mortal threat hanging over Lianna like a quiet and oversized demon. Was he supposed to pretend this demon didn't exist? Love was beautiful and supposed to overcome obstacles. But what if it didn't? What if it imposed a sentence of frustration and burdens? Don't be stupid; all couples dealt with mortality at some point; he just faced it before there even was a relationship. Could love grow without that initial period of carefree sensuality? He was not a saint. As he inched closer to middle age, he still wanted passion just as much as he had when he was 20. Even as the market for romantic liaisons dwindled, he still liked to imagine passionate rendezvous and – don't deny it – marrying a sexually exciting woman. He was in love with the idea of love, as they say. He couldn't pretend otherwise. On this day – quite apart from the specter of cancer, he still lusted after Lianna; for a moment, he could forget that she had cancer and believe they were just on a date and this was just a prelude to a night of passion….

The food at the Oasis was mediocre (certainly not worth the 45 minute wait), but it was nice and relaxing to feel the autumn breeze. Both of them gazed over Lake Travis, watching the sun go down. At first, they were oblivious to it – paying more attention to the excessive wait for the enchiladas to arrive. But the wait wasn't unpleasant. One remark about a bookstore led to a conversation about going to high school in the 1980s, which branched out to various conversational tangents: the Austin music scene, career miscalculations and the exact moment of time each of them learned about the "real world." Then he realized how dark it was.

"The sun is going down," he said.

"Oh, yes," she said, scooting her chair around for a better view of Lake Travis. They could see two faraway boats speeding away, but from their vantage point, the boats hardly seemed to move. The sun was lowering – even though to their eyes, the movement was imperceptible.

"How much time is left?" she asked.

"Five minutes?" he said, but that was just a guess. The conversation

petered out to a few occasional remarks; their eyes were distracted by the possibility that their eyes might miss the exact moment when the earth would swallow the sun. People around them kept chattering even though both of them had run out of things to say. The lack of conversation wasn't unpleasant; it was even relaxing to sit and wait for an ordinary event which happened every day without notice. In the fading light, Lianna's face still looked lovely; yet her beauty which was once self-evident now was easy to overlook. She still laughed like before; it was the laugh not of a young girl but a corporate lawyer who knew her time on earth was limited. Under the florescent office lights, she was a pretty face whose blemishes were becoming harder to disguise. But under the fading light, she still looked more beautiful than ever. While she gazed at the skyline, he spent more time watching the way the lowering of the sun held her attention. This was a woman who still found pleasures in things; he imagined how that same face would look as it experienced the excitement of a thousand caresses. To fuck Lianna would be glorious. A bell rang to announce sundown, and people at nearby tables started cheering. Lianna looked over at him, amused at all the fuss.

"Okay, now I can cross sunset at Oasis off my list. Next item: visiting the Grand Canyon."

An hour later, they were heading back to the car.

"By the way, I picked up a book for you," he said.

"Really? What kind?"

"It's in the back seat of the car. It's a recipe book written by a breast cancer survivor."

Lianna laughed.

"You're not into cooking?"

"Well…. someone at work gave me a similar book, maybe even the same one."

"You're kidding me!"

"It's probably a different book." When they came to the car, he showed her the book. Lianna giggled when she saw it.

"Shit," he said in mock-anger. "I wonder if I have the receipt."

"You should always keep your receipt. Anyway, it was the thought that counts," she said, giving him a quick hug.

"I couldn't decide whether to get you this or a yoga book."

"A yoga book would have been interesting," she said.

"I figured that yoga might help you reconnect with your body and maybe deal with the pain."

"True."

"If you want, we could stop by the bookstore to exchange it."

"Not now," she said. "Do it next week."

As he started driving, the phrase "next week" hung in the air. That point in time seemed far away.

"So what's next week's schedule like for you?"

"Please, I don't want to talk about next week."

"I understand," he said. "I just want to know when to check up on you."

"Oh, right," Lianna said. "All the hospital information is at home."

Lianna's townhome seemed in partial disarray, with shopping bags beside the refrigerator and papers on her living room table. Lianna opened her laptop and searched for the hospital information. "Do you want me to print it out?"

"That's a good idea."

Matt played with her poodle while Lianna went to the kitchen to prepare tea. He looked around and saw elegant furniture, New Mexico knickknacks and framed photos of people on her bookshelf.

"Turn on the TV if you like." Lianna called from the kitchen.

"No, that's ok."

After she brought herbal tea, she went over the hospital information with him. So many details. As she talked, he rested his hand briefly on her shoulder. Lianna immediately went back to the kitchen to fill the dog's water dish.

The next move was his, and he knew it. His attraction to her was no longer spontaneous but something he sought (without really knowing why). Tonight she was receptive to romance (in his opinion) but wary. Romance was still not a foregone conclusion. For a moment he imagined just remaining friends with her; would it be so bad? He tried to look at things from a logical point of view. There were all kinds of risk in romance; rejection, loss of independence and even death. What did he want? Romance? Passion? Or simply a chance to fuck the older version of the woman he once lusted after? The thought of it still appealed to him even though he had no idea how it would happen now that they were alone. She wasn't a happy person anymore. She worried, she complained, she was too serious. After he tried to hold her hand, she pulled away. "Tonight is not the night to start something romantic," she said.

"Sorry, I didn't…"

"No it's okay. Just keep me company. That's all I want tonight. Stay close to me. I don't want to be alone." She leaned against him, facing the wall.

"I've had problems sleeping," she said. "I think it's nervousness. I get up in the middle of the night and go online to read the breast cancer forums.

Perhaps I hope to learn something. But when I browse through medical news and blogs, I keep stumbling upon memorials to women who died. It's depressing. Many were strong and successful woman who lost their fights. I came across a wonderful blog by a woman named Billie who collected practical tips for dealing with chemo. I sent her a short email to show my appreciation, but 30 seconds later the email was returned undelivered. I realized that her last entry was last February after six years of blogging. Her last post was nothing special – just a description of a doctor's visit, but after that, nothing. It took me by surprise – and it could have been me. I'm sorry; it's hard being normal around a man tonight." He liked the way she described him as a man.

"Sure. Let's just enjoy the company."

"I just … I just have no idea what the future will be like. A few months ago the future seemed boring and predictable. I didn't dread it. But now everything seems melodramatic and frightening. What is my life going to be like next week or three months from now? I worry that doctors will be controlling my life now …. I worry that I'll end up agreeing to whatever they propose … no matter how heinous. How can I – or anyone else – stay sane?"

As she talked, she flipped randomly through a magazine without paying it attention. She seemed so high-strung. He took her hand and held it. Then he said:

"Do you want to make love?"

For a split second he thought she hadn't heard and was about to repeat it, but Lianna was trying to process it.

"Do I?" she said with a slight laugh. She was less offended than amused. "I don't know. Is that your solution to things?"

"It's a solution," he said.

"If I said yes, would it make you happy?"

"Of course," he said. "But it has to be your desire also."

He stroked her shoulders.

"But why should I do it? What would it mean?"

"Whatever you want it to mean," he said.

"But are you in love with me?" she asked.

"I think so. I know it's sudden."

"Why do you think you feel that way?"

For a moment, he could think of nothing to say. "Because you're beautiful and I want to know you better."

She sighed and said, "At least you're being honest."

"Can I kiss you?"

"Why ask? Aren't you supposed to be in love with me?"

He bent over to kiss her. It was not particularly passionate; it was just a soft and simple kiss. "What did you think?" he asked.

"Sorry, I'm trying to get used to the idea."

"Would you like another?"

"Ok," she said and embraced him. She tried to relax and enjoy the sensations. As he held her, they watched her dog Dino prance around the room.

"The cancer treatments are going to fuck up my sex drive," she said. "I'm not going to be a sexy young woman anymore."

"But tonight you are still beautiful."

Normally a woman's ambivalence would have made him hesitate or even back off. But tonight was different. He felt he had to do everything possible to seduce her. She needed to stop acting like a sick old woman. It was all in her mind; she still had the ability to captivate men. He kissed her again.

"Did you like that?" she asked.

At first, he was going to turn the question around and ask her the same thing. But he realized she was trying to take pleasure from his enjoyment.

"It was wonderful," he said.

"I know this may sound strange. But I'm almost indifferent to passion tonight. If we do it, that's fine; if not, that's fine too."

"Are you trying to make me mad?" he said.

"Not at all! I just don't think tonight is about passion ..."

"What do you mean?"

"It's about keeping me distracted or not being alone..."

"Is that so wrong?" he asked.

"I guess not," she said after a moment's reflection.

"This is your night," he said, "but if you are not really into it, I won't enjoy it either."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Want it more."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have a lot on my mind."

He slid his arm down her chests and over her breasts. There was no hiding his intentions anymore.

"Did you like that?"

"Yes," she said with a hint of sarcasm.

He rested his hand over her lap in a blatant erotic touch. "You need to want it more," he said.

"What do you want from me?"

"To fuck!"

Lianna laughed. "Matt, tonight is supposed to be romantic. Aren't you supposed to get me in the mood?"

"Close your eyes," he said.

When she did, he put his hand on her cheek and over her hair, ending with a kiss.

"Was that romantic?"

"I guess," she said.

"Are you ready to fuck now?"

"Matt, if you continue talking like that, I'm going to ask you to leave."

"Talk like what?"

"Using the F-word."

"Oh, that," he said with sarcastic recognition. "I had no idea the word offended you. Ok, I promise not to use that word again."

"Good."

"Except when we're fucking."

"Matt!"

"I'm kidding." He whispered into her ear, "Would you like to go to the bedroom now?"

"First, let me take Dino into the backyard," she said.

As she opened the back door to let the dog out, he put his arm around her. Dino wandered about the backyard, investigating the random smell or blade of grass.

"Dino is probably the closest friend I have at the moment, and he hasn't a clue that I have breast cancer."

"For tonight, I can pretend you don't have cancer."

He was just being light-hearted, but his remark came off sounding awkward, and Lianna didn't even acknowledge it.

Minutes later, she had changed, and he was shirtless. Both were seated on the bed.

"How long has it been since you've gone to bed with someone?" he asked.

"Two years," she said. "And you?"

"Six."

"No wonder you're so eager to get my clothes off."

"I can't lie; I have wanted you for a long time. But I wouldn't be trying so hard if I didn't think you were special."

"Your romantic lies are so charming."

"Do you want me to be in love with you?"

She paused. "I don't know."

"Do you want a man to be in love with you for one evening at least?

"You should not use the L word so casually. For all I know, tonight could be the end of the story."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. He lay her down and helped her remove the blouse and the bra. She had already turned off the lights, but he could see the outlines of her topless body.

She seemed delicate and vulnerable …. He immediately laid his hands upon her as a gesture not of grasping but healing.

"Please don't touch me there," she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, it just feels weird …. That whole area feels like foreign territory to me. Now that I know what's going on under the skin, I almost wish I could lop off those breasts myself."

He paused and reflected. "The odd thing about breasts is that there's nothing remarkable about them. They are small and delicate and visible on almost all women's outfits, yet there are so rarely exposed … except in movies. Their proximity and perpetual unavailability drives all men crazy. Were your breasts always this sensitive?"

Pause.

"Yes."

"How does a woman so young and beautiful have the misfortune to have breast cancer?"

"Life sucks and then you die," she said.

"Did you like it when other boyfriends touched you there?" he said, slowly caressing the areas around her breasts.

"Sure …."

"Did you like to caress them yourself?"

"Well …."

He bent over and kissed her shoulder. "Aside from the last year, have you have been happy with your breasts? Generally, I mean."

"That's a stupid question," she said. "Are you happy with your ears or your toes?"

"Did they give you pleasure?"

"It's hard to explain. They're like useless appendages which could kill a person."

"But did they ever give you pleasure?"

"Of course…"

"Let me touch them," he said, moving his hand slowly over the curves of her chest. "They like to be touched, don't they?"

"Actually, it feels a little revolting."

His right hand came across a small lump underneath her nipple.

"That's it, isn't it?"

"That's right," she said, with a kind of resignation. "Don't touch too hard. It's somewhat painful."

"I'm sorry."

"No, that's okay," she said, bringing his hand back to her. "A little bit is fine." He stroked it lightly and moved to the other breast, which seemed perfectly ordinary.

"Did you say both breasts had cancer?"

"Yes, my right breast is cancerous too, but there are no visible signs, just mild inflammation."

"Does it hurt?"

"It feels fine. You can touch it."

"Does it feel good?"

"It feels all right."

He was confused about whether to keep touching her breasts, so he moved his hand down her chest and hips. He embraced her slowly, enjoying the touch of her skin without experiencing an urgent need to fuck her.

"Who was the first man who touched your breasts?"

Lianna thought for a few seconds and giggled. "My middle school science teacher!"

"What?"

"I was in Mr. Levinton's classroom when I tried to reach for a bottle on a shelf before it collapsed. As I tried to keep it from falling over, Mr. Levinton rushed beside me and tried to take hold of it. But he accidentally brushed his hand against my boob for a second as he tried to hold up the shelf."

"Did he do it on purpose?"

"No, it was an accident! But still I was embarrassed about it for the rest of the day, and my friends teased me about it."

"When was the first time you let a man touch your breasts?"

"In high school. My boyfriend and I were in his car, and he slipped his hand down my bra."

"Did you like it?"

"It surprised me! It was not a bad feeling; I just wasn't ready for it… But within a few weeks it became part of our romantic routine."

Matt bent over a kissed her breast slowly. "Did your boyfriend kiss them?"

Oh, yes," she said. "Many times…"

"That was me. I wanted your breasts at the time. Your lovely teenage breasts. I wanted them when I wanted you…."

She lay there quietly while he kissed her there.

"I'm grateful to be the last man to kiss your breasts. Maybe to you showing your breasts is an ordinary event – like a sunset – but for me it is a beautiful vision, a special moment. "

"No, don't say that," she said. "The sun rises every day. But the breasts – once they're gone, they're gone forever."

"Do your breasts want to feel pleasure tonight?"

"They are no longer my breasts."

"But they're still sensitive to the touch," he said, slipping his hand down her body.

She giggled nervously and drew his hand away.

"Have you ever kissed another woman's breast?"

"No!" she cried indignantly. "You are such a pervert."

"Have you ever touched another woman's breasts?"

She thought a moment and said, "Once I helped a girlfriend try on a formal dress and touched her boob."

"But it wasn't erotic?"

"No."

"Did you ever want to?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I like your breasts…. They are still sexy."

"Enjoy them while they last," Lianna said. "But they were never my erotic center anyway."

"Of course not," he agreed, brushing his hand over her underwear. "I think I've found another place …"

"No stupid, I'm talking about my brain. That's the most erotic organ of the body."

"How interesting. And where is this 'brain' you keep mentioning?" He ran his fingers down the back of her head. Lianna laughed. "I don't want your breasts to be jealous." He kissed her chest again, moving to one of the nipples. "Have you given them names?"

"Not really."

"Then we must name them. This breast is naughty and adventurous. Her name is Britney."

"No! Not like Britney Spears?"

"Ok, ok, how about Marla…"

"I can live with that."

"But this one … is special. Her name is Patricia. She is sad and lived a

sad life. She dreams of something better. She longs to visit distant lands, perhaps visit the Canary Islands…. And yet she knows it is not meant to be …. Patricia has a beauty that is almost tragic…."

"You sound ridiculous."

"Patricia and Marla won't be around much longer. I need to make sure they are happy." He nibbled down her chest.

"Please," she whispered. "Not too hard."

"Sorry." He tried a softer motion. "Is this good?"

"Yes," she nodded, eyes closed.

"You are so delicate today," he said. "I don't want to cause any pain."

"Don't worry – I'll let you know," she said.

He removed her panties, sliding them down her nervous legs. He bent down to give her pussy a respectful kiss. While he searched for sensitive places, her eyes glanced at the ceiling, agitated and lost in thought. Was she even enjoying herself? He continued the caresses, listening for sounds of appreciation. A short laugh came from her lips, then silence. His kisses moved up her body, lingering at the curves of her breast, hoping to elicit sighs. Her body was tense and stiff. But her skin was soft to his fingers; she made a low hum of enjoyment as her limbs began unwinding. Finally, with his assistance she moved into an entirely sexual realm.

"You can take me now," she whispered. Although the declaration sounded passive and detached, she was in fact ready for anything. Her legs rustled against his own, and her arms began to wander around him as well. They were going to fuck! The moment was finally here. He positioned himself to start the lovemaking, but just as he was about to dip into her, she hesitated and moved back… "Wait –" she whispered. "I forgot my diaphragm. I'll be back in a sec," she said, heading to the bathroom.

"No problem," he said, momentarily caught off guard.

When she returned a few minutes later, she said, "We need to be careful," she said. "I cannot get pregnant under any circumstances. The chemo would poison any baby. My God. Pregnancy would be such a tragedy. I cannot under any circumstances have a baby."

The passion of the moment had broken.

"How effective are diaphragms anyway?" he asked.

"Pretty effective. 90-95% effective." she said.

"Is that good enough?" he asked.

She paused. "It will have to be," she said.

"I have condoms in the car. We could use that too if you want."

"Maybe you better," she agreed. As he began to get dressed to go outside, Lianna touched his arm and said, "No, don't worry about that. It

will be okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, let's just get on with it," she said, kissing him again, almost in a rush. Her legs were spread open and she lay waiting for his body totally without shame. He dipped into her again, and Lianna sucked in her breath (was he going in too fast?)

"Is that ok?" he said.

"It's fine."

He turned her on her side and tried again from behind, pushing into her. At the first push she made a loud moan. As he moved again and grabbed her breasts, she winced and pulled away. He must have grabbed her breasts too roughly.

"Sorry. I didn't –"

"Don't worry about it. Keep fucking me.... Don't treat me differently. Fuck me like any other woman."

He pushed again, and she groaned. The groan sounded more angry than sexy, but she reciprocated with frantic kisses.

He kept pushing in, and then gave one huge thrust which made her recoil in pain. He hesitated, but she reached behind to keep his body close to hers. "Don't stop," she whispered quickly.

"Do you like it?"

"Fuck me. Goddammit, just fuck me!"

In erotic fiction, how old should the main characters be? Lisa and the narrator disagree. (**Read more**)

Yes, I'm Beautiful Too

A flight attendant disrobes and dreams. An ex-stripper meditates on desire and beauty.

Yes, I used to be one of those dancers. You should have seen me. I had one routine so good I never bothered learning another. I used to go onstage in a stewardess outfit with gold buttons, pushing a pretend beverage cart down the aisles. While the music played at the club, I pretended to bump into people, excusing myself and offering blankets. I would bend over imaginary passengers to take their imaginary cups, treating them to a generous view of my bosom. I would motion gracefully to the club exits and take out an old orange seatbelt, demonstrating its use. At some point the blouse would come undone. I'd pretend embarrassment and giggle. Next I would pick up an oxygen mask, breathing into it, giving it a kiss and tossing it out into the crowd. At that point, the undressing

would begin: first, the hat, then the blue top (loosened one button at a time), then the hose (which I teased down my legs). Then I began dancing; I could have danced to the Star Spangled Banner for all I cared. The slip came off next, and after a series of hesitations, off came the bra. Wearing nothing but a G-string and my cup, I'd motion once again to the exits. By then a crowd of men would be standing near the stage, waiting for the privilege to tuck dollars beneath my G-string.

I used to be pretty good. For a while I was leading off at the Esquire, making five hundred on a Friday night. I danced at several clubs across town, quitting when the tips were bad or I felt like a change in scenery. Once I got fired for showing up drunk too many times. That was a phase. I used to stay at the club all night and let weirdos buy me drinks. Everyone said I was hysterical when I got drunk. One night after work I went out to wait for my ride without realizing I had nothing on. I stood outside for a good five minutes while customers walked by. And when my boyfriend arrived (I think it was Andy), he freaked.

"Where are your clothes?" he asked.

I looked strangely at him. "What do you mean?"

"Put on some clothes!"

I started laughing once I realized what I'd done and waltzed into the empty club. The dressing room was locked, so I went to Phil for the key. Phil was in the back room reconciling the night's receipts. He motioned for me to wait while he punched a few more numbers into the calculator. Finally, he looked up and said, "What do you need?"

It took a second to get my mouth going. "Uh, I forgot my clothes," I said. Phil liked to tease me about that later. When he walked by me during a performance, he'd say, "Don't forget your clothes!" It was our private joke.

What a dumb cluck I used to be! I tell you, I don't know how I did it. Thank god I never got in any serious trouble. Well except maybe for Frank. Forgot about that. I met him at a club, and he took me to six different bars in one night. By the time we got to the fourth, I was dead drunk. It didn't take a genius to figure out why he was getting me drunk, but I was only twenty and didn't have a chance to figure things out. Though I didn't really feel like it, we ended up doing it at my apartment. All I remember thinking was he better not puke on the sheets. The next day I was so mad at myself. Was I stupid? He could have gotten me pregnant or given me AIDS. From that point on, I laid off the hard stuff, though I still drink beer. The next day I told one of the dancers what happened. She looked at me with disgust and said, "You gotta be naive." "You're only naive once," I replied.

I danced at several clubs, but El Dorado was my favorite. I still work

there now, not as a dancer, but a cocktail waitress. They know how to treat a girl right. They don't screw you out of tips. Phil's a great manager. I swear, when he was around, I'd do anything for him. If he asked me to paint the kitchen, I wouldn't have minded. The food there was actually decent, although a little expensive. The customers don't get too rowdy – most are damn near polite, the kind of men who go around wearing coat and ties. They say the med students come here a lot, but I never see any. The only two I ever saw were nerdy Indians who drank a lot and tipped very little. Gross! I'm not going to go gaga over somebody just because he says he's going to be a doctor. The club doesn't get many regulars, although we get a lot of bachelor parties. That's my favorite kind of crowd. The tips are great, and the men are fun too, unlike the zombies who just drink and stare at you all night long.

They say private parties are where the real money is. But I generally avoid them. It seems dangerous. You never know what's it going to be like or who's going to be there. What if the guys are a bunch of perverts? At least in a club, you're in a semi-public place with security guards and other dancers. I only did one private party – what a disaster! A good friend of mine got sick at the last minute and asked me to fill in. It was a bachelor party in the suburbs, so I said, what the hell. I owed her a few favors. I arrived at about nine, and – would you believe it? – the guy had the nerve to invite his fiance. I don't mind taking off my clothes, but I didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings. The man enjoyed my performance, but he seemed to enjoy his fiance's discomfort even more. At first, she was a good sport, but an hour later, she got real bitchy. He was drunk; god, they were both drunk. I should have left sooner. I'd never done a private party before, and I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. I started talking to the guys, and that was fun. It was like I was just another person at the party. They let me have a drink and help myself at the buffet table. After a while, everyone started getting rude, and I remember thinking, this is shit, people you don't even know are chatting with you because you don't have any clothes. I didn't need this shit, and the fiance started yelling at him that if he doesn't like her she should spend his life with "his other girlfriend" (pointing to me). Hey, I'm nobody's girlfriend, I'm just doing my job. I didn't care about their relationship bullshit; I just wanted to finish up and leave. If that wasn't bad enough, one guy took me aside and offered me $200 to give Billy a blowjob. I was shocked! Later I realized that the man was probably just kidding around about giving Billy the blowjob. How do I put up with that shit? Men are just so gross!

Now's not a good time to talk about men. I have the damnest luck with

them these days. If Phil were still around, things might be different. We had quite a thing going. He used to be a basketball player, he said. He had gorgeous blonde hair and nice chiseled body, real easygoing type. He did me all sorts of favors not because he wanted something, but because he liked me. He gave me good shifts and didn't care if I showed up late. All the girls liked him, not just me. Too bad we never became something. Oh well. Phil was always going around with the younger crowd; that's how men are, aren't they? I'm only 27; I'm not ancient, but you can't compete with the nineteen year olds that come through the pipeline. Those are the facts of life, and I know it. Maybe if he knew me when I was younger, things would have been different. No, that's the past, and I shouldn't think about it. He had tons of girlfriends, but he never could talk to them like he talked to me. I think he kissed me once … maybe. He kissed everybody. When he wasn't busy, he used to stand in the back and applaud the girls onstage. Soon it became a joke. He was like our biggest fan. "Where are those twenties?" we'd say to him when we passed him during the show. One time on a slow night, we got to talking about the future. I told him I'd like to do something practical, like be a nurse or teacher. Phil told me he wanted to open his own club. "None of this men's club shit. I'd like it to be a romantic place where girls and guys can go together and eat and dance and do whatever the hell they want. Live music, but not too loud, and open until three or four." I looked at him and saw the restaurant dream in his eyes. Phil was the kind who could take an idea and make it work. I pictured myself in Phil's vision; I was helping out or managing the waitstaff. We were having lots of fun, making lots of money.

Men like Phil remind you that all men are not gross. I wish I knew what happened to him. One night he stopped coming to work, and when I asked Marty about it (Marty was the GM), he said Phil was on extended vacation. I didn't think anything of it until a month later. There was still no word from Phil. I asked around, but nobody knew what happened. One girl thought Phil got a better offer. Another thought he got arrested. Somebody else said he got in a big fight with the GM. I still wonder what he's doing. Later, I decided that if he didn't want to say goodbye to us, there must be a reason.

With Phil gone, I sometimes wonder why I stay. It's not as fun anymore. I keep meaning to get along with my life, go back to school or look for a real job. But something always comes up. I take a trip to Cancun, or my car needs a new transmission or I run a few more thousand on the credit card. So I say, just a few more months. Just until I get out of this hole. My big sister comes to the club sometimes. Usually she's trying to persuade me to

get my life straightened out. She's pretty cool about it, but she thinks I can be just like her. Has it ever occurred to her I don't want to? I'm glad she's a lawyer, but not everyone can go to law school. I plan to move on when I'm good and ready. My mom's convinced I'm sort of an addict or hooker, but that's not it at all. I just want to enjoy myself and live the way I want. A person can't do that in a law firm.

My sister got me into detox when I was drinking too much. Thank god for her then. I still make it a point to introduce her to all my serious boyfriends. We go to matinee movies when we get the chance, *Jurassic Park*, *Silence of the Lambs*, those sorts of things. Once we saw *Last Temptation of Christ*. I remember the baby blue eyes that Jesus had, the scene where he goes into a woman's house and looks up at her, begging her to forgive him. It's one of my favorite scenes; I remember watching it several times on the VCR. I could watch Willem Dafoe's eyes for an eternity.

Of course, that's a dream, a movie dream. Things never happen like that in real life. The real Jesus probably would have a cow if he saw what I did onstage. He would have tried to give the same lecture my mom has been giving me for the last seven years. I don't have problems with religious types, as long as they don't try to tell me what to do. I'm just too laid back for them. Still, it's nice to go to church once in a while, just to sit and daydream, not having to be onstage all the time. I even put a little money in the basket. I know what it's like living off people's generosity.

My luck with guys hasn't been improving. They always start out nice, and once you start getting comfortable they burn you. Billy was my first boyfriend, the con artist. He said he owned a company, but actually he was just a salesman. I can put up with lots of shit, but when I discovered money missing and found him once ruffling through my purse, I said no way Jose and kicked him out. My next boyfriend was no better; he had an affair with another girl and didn't tell me for two months. After that I went with Rick. Rick wasn't bad, just boring; he treated me well and bought me gifts. If only he didn't drink so much, he'd be semi-decent. The drinking didn't bother me as much as the fact that he never wanted to do anything. It drove me crazy.

That was when I got involved with Chuck. What a case. Everybody said he should be a comedian. He clowned around so much you never knew when he was serious. He was the life of the party. Once when we were in Austin he put a live snake underneath my chair at a restaurant. Another time he went to a wedding dressed as Abe Lincoln. We traveled a lot, went to Acapulco. On one trip I forgot to give him the hotel key, only to find him waiting by the door when I returned. Once inside, he slapped me real hard

and said in a low voice, "Don't ever do that again."

It shocked and embarrassed me. A few minutes later he was back to his usual clowning like nothing had happened. I thought it was a fluke, and he was too ashamed to apologize. But two weeks later he hit me again for interrupting him during a basketball game. A basketball game. At that point I had enough and said adios to him. That was a year and a half ago. I haven't been dating since then.

The guys at the club aren't bad; most are pretty nice and like to have intelligent conversations. What is an intelligent conversation anyway? That's what men in the club say they want, but I never could figure out what they mean. I like talking and could talk to anyone. When you've done a couple thousand table dances, you learn to make conversations last a really long time. And ever since I switched from dancing to waitressing, I do even more talking. The regular clients tell me about bad wives and girlfriends, and I tell them about wacko boyfriends. Everybody's friendly in the club, and the money just makes everyone friendlier. Guys are always asking me out, but that's because I'm easier to talk to than the girls onstage. They talk to me because I am more down-to-earth, less glamorous.

My tips as a waitress don't compare with my tips as a dancer. That's fine. I knew it was going to end someday. I've gotten fat over the years, and I wouldn't show off my tits to anyone now. I was a dancer for five years and a waitress for two. I stayed at El Dorado the longest, although that was mainly waitressing. I wanted to quit dancing before I started looking too shabby. The new girls are always beautiful and keep on coming. Men can tell when you've been doing it awhile. The girls can dance the same dances and show off the same tits, but men lose interest; it's only natural; they want a new face or notice all the makeup or the tough expression on the older girl's face. At Gigi's, I once saw a 21 year old with bloated artificial tits, loads of mascara and a body so thin she had to be starving herself. She looked hideously sexy. She danced all alone on the corner stage, keeping her eyes closed while dozens of men walked by just ignoring her. It was pathetic. Why would a human being continue when her body went to shot like that? I made it a point to quit before things got too bad.

People at the club thought I was crazy. But I stayed firm. I had my moment in the spotlight, and now was the time for me to scoot over for the new girls. Within six months, most of the dancers forgot I ever danced. That's okay. I don't mind. The new girls treat me nice, and I look after them, give them help on their routines. They're so immature. The six or seven years that separate us seem like decades. I tell the girls to take

classes, put those tips in the bank and watch out on the number of drinks. But nobody listens. I guess those are things you have to learn the hard way.

Recently, one of my customers said he thought he'd seen me before. "Didn't you used to work at 'Fantasy Island?'"

"For a while."

"Were you the one who did the stewardess thing, the thing with the seatbelt?"

"The same," I said, chuckling.

"You were terrific! You used to be my favorite dancer. I could watch you dance forever."

"Thanks," I said, a little flattered and embarrassed.

"Do you remember me? I used to sit along the wall, right beside the TV screen."

I looked at him. I'd never seen this man before in my life. "Uhhhh…"

"You remember – I used to come in with Melvin. You remember him – the tall black guy with the cowboy hat. You used to give us table dances."

"I think I remember you now," I said, still searching for a memory. The lighting was terrible in that club; the man was almost a dark-haired shadow who looked a little younger than me. "Is this your first time here?"

"Yes," he said. "I usually hang out at Arabian Nights. Are you dancing tonight?"

I smiled. "It's been a long time since I've done that."

"You mean you don't dance anymore?"

I smiled.

"Why not? You could probably teach these girls a thing or two."

"What would you like to drink?"

"I'd give you a hundred dollars if you do me a table dance right now."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"No? What about two hundred? I'll give you two hundred to do a table dance."

"You don't understand," I said. "I don't dance anymore."

I went to another table for a few minutes, and when I passed that guy's table again, I saw he had laid eight hundred dollar bills on the table. "These are yours if you come to my apartment for a private dance."

"No way," I said, getting a little pissed off.

"Listen to me," he said, grabbing my arm. I pulled away. "You are the most beautiful girl I've seen. I won't do any funny stuff. Just a dance for old time's sake. That's all. Nothing else. No funny stuff, I promise."

For a moment, I was tempted. One more table dance wouldn't do any harm. But you can't be everything to everybody. A man so desperate for a

woman must have something wrong with him. I finally got a good look at the guy; he didn't look too sleazy, and his eyes were so serious it was hard to turn away. I might have gone ahead and done it if I had been attracted to him. But he was only average-looking, even a little fat.

The news of the $800 offer spread throughout the club; by the end of the night, the other dancers had a new respect for me. I enjoyed repeating the story, imitating how the man sighed and huffed out the club. The girls thought I was crazy. Maybe I was. That evening bugs me to this day. What if I had done the dance? Would it have been no big deal? The more I think about it, the more I think he was just a lonely, desperate guy. Not too many men would have paid that much for a dance; he had to be a little special. I didn't know if the man was just a pervert or an MD or both, but I never bothered to find out.

I did break my rule about dancing one time. El Dorado was having an amateur night, and on a lark I did my stewardess routine again. Amazingly enough, I still had the uniform and oxygen mask in my closet. I danced once and made only thirty dollars. But I didn't care; all the dancers cheered me on, and the club customers must have had no idea why I had a cheering section. But once was enough to get it out of my system.

Recently I've been unable to take my eyes off the girls dancing onstage. I can't explain. I look at them and try to imagine myself when I used to dance. I was never beautiful, but I never looked bad; I can still look decent sometimes. Beauty doesn't last forever, but at least it doesn't disappear; it just keeps fading away and flickering back for brief magical moments. I stared at my reflection behind the topless girl onstage and thought about the times when people's eyes were on me. I imagined doing the stewardess routine again. In that daydream, everybody watched while I puckered my lips on the mask. Phil would be in the back applauding loudly, the man with the $800 would be saying, "You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," and a kneeling Willem Dafoe would gaze with those baby blue eyes, saying, "Forgive me, please forgive me."

Are male writers or female writers better at writing stories with sexy females? Lisa and the narrator disagree. (**Read more**)

Negotiating Tactics

Lawyers in love argue about consent and perversity.

One night over dinner, Matt snapped a photo of his fiance in a casual pose. "Wow," he said, glancing at the image on the phone. "You look sexy as hell."

"Let me see," Adele said, grabbing the phone. "Nice," she said, admiring the way it captured her expression – relaxed yet sultry.

"You're so photogenic," he said.

"Thanks."

"Let me take another."

"No," she said, averting her eyes as the flash on the mobile phone went off again.

"How about that?" Matt said. Another winner. The photo depicted her modestly looking down. Matt found it extremely alluring; he kept taking random photos of her at the restaurant, with each picture capturing a split second of her sexiness. He knew that in real life Adele was just a normal

(albeit pretty) woman, but in photos, she looked mysterious and sexy; every pose seemed to reveal a new nuance.

Later they had a vigorous night of lovemaking, with Matt whispering that she was his favorite model, and Adele giggling the whole time.

The next day, Adele awoke from her nap to find her fiance sitting in a chair opposite the bed, looking at her.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing's the matter," Matt said softly.

"It's disconcerting to wake and find you watching me."

"Don't be alarmed," he replied, lost in thought.

"How long were you at your parent's house?"

"I stayed until 2:30, then stopped at the supermarket. But it doesn't matter."

"Ok," she said, laughing. "I was just asking."

"Adele, don't take this the wrong way, but ..."

"What?"

"I'd like to take more photos of you."

She laughed. "Like the photos at the restaurant?"

"No, special photos."

"What do you mean?"

Matt said nothing, and Adele laughed. "Oh, you mean X-rated photos."

"You guessed it," he said.

"In your dreams," she said, getting up to do something in the other room.

Later that evening, during a conversation pause, Matt said, "You know I was being serious when I asked about doing some special photos."

"I know," Adele said.

"Maybe you can give it serious consideration."

"I already did."

"But why are you so opposed?"

"Look," she said, trying to be polite. "You read all the time about nude or pornographic photos which are shared accidentally. Or guys who share it to embarrass their exes. We can see each other naked all the time. No need to make a photo of it."

"But it's more than that. I want to capture those private sexy moments with you. Don't worry. I can promise that my photos of you will make you look great."

Adele groaned. Matt dabbled in photography and believed that he had a knack for the visual. When they were on a three day weekend in Miami, the photos he uploaded to social media did look spectacular (everyone had

praised them). His photostream was populated with offbeat photos of everyday objects and scenery; Matt did seem to know the basics of lighting and lens speed, plus he owned a nice camera. Much as he liked to entertain notions that he was a serious photographer, Adele saw him as just a litigation attorney with a penchant for taking photos.

Without admitting it directly, she conceded that if Matt took naughty photos of her, they would probably look good. That was not the point. There was no need to have visual evidence of her sexuality which could be made public at any time. She was a little shy about her body; who wasn't? She was pretty enough, but hated to think about how she might appear undressed – or specifically how awkward some photos could be if they showed up online somewhere.

"I already see myself in the mirror every day," Adele said. "Just drop it."

Matt did not. Two evenings later, when they were in bed together, and Matt was massaging her as a prelude to making love, he said with a smile, "What would it take to convince you to pose for some erotic photos?"

She smiled. She realized Matt wasn't planning to leave it alone.

"It depends," she said, flirtatiously. "What are you offering?"

"I might have some things you'd be interested in."

"Well, first I'd like security guarantees. Then, I'd need some written agreement promising to compensate me for my losses in the event the photos were leaked in an unauthorized manner. Then, I'd like final edits and the ability to veto certain photos. Then I'd like to add 50 more guests to the wedding. I'd also like a cash payment of $20,000, made upfront before any photos are made as a guarantee against future injury."

"You are being unreasonable," he said sighing and lightly kissing her shoulder.

"Also, none of the photos can show anything hardcore, and none can be demeaning."

"How do you define 'demeaning'?"

"Like the spread-eagle shots in old girlie magazines."

"Now you're taking the fun out of everything."

"Your loss," she replied.

"Let me think about it," he said, and then they made love in an unsurprising way.

The next day when he came home from work, he said, "I've been thinking a lot about your conditions for erotic photos."

"Oh, you have," she said laughing.

"I could try to meet your conditions halfway. The only thing I object to is the cash payment. $20,000 is an awful lot of money, even on my salary.

Given that we will soon be marrying and our assets will be commingling, it seems ridiculous to ask for a cash payment."

"Too bad."

"In the interest of showing respect for you and my commitment to being fair, I'm willing to offer $1000 today, plus $500 earmarked specifically for erotic lingerie and adult accoutrements."

"No way," she said. "Okay, maybe I just threw that number out to scare you, but I would need $3000 cash payment up front, $1000 for clothing, and also, a codicil to the prenup agreement where you declare the Tesla to be community property."

As Matt paused to consider the counteroffer, Adele added, "Take it or leave it."

"Before addressing your interesting offer," Matt began, "I want to suggest that the ability to make hardcore or centerfold-type photos is part of the value to me. Softcore photos aren't really taboo enough. What's the point of softcore photos?"

"What a pervert you are," Adele said, contemptuously putting her hand on his penis as if to hold it at bay. But she really wasn't angry; it was just for play.

"That's who I am, I'm afraid," Matt admitted. "And it's never going to change."

"Then I'm going to need $5000 payment up front, $2000 for clothing, and the prenup codicil. And also, these allowances are required for every year in which you want to take or keep your wretched dirty photos."

Matt sighed, "Adele, be reasonable. It's not in your best interest to make me poor. After April 26, for all practical purposes our finances will be commingled. There's no point in asking for recurring payments."

"I cannot give a blanket authorization to take photos without clearly defined time limitations. You should know that."

"Ok," Matt said, "I realize that you are married to the idea of recurring payments (if you will pardon the pun). In the interest of showing good faith, I am willing to make some kind of recurring payment – let's say every year. But that means, first, the annual payments are going to be less than an upfront sum, and second, we need to have provisions to ensure that hardcore photos are allowed under the agreement."

Adele thought about it for a few seconds. "I'm willing to entertain hardcore photos," she said, "but never any video."

"Certainly," Matt said. He really didn't have any interest in making videos. Also, to be honest with himself, that would require buying two different cameras and tripods (not to mention a different light kit).

Making a presentable video required a different skill set (not to mention a non-linear editor), and he wasn't sure he could pull it off.

"If I agree to hardcore photos," Adele said, "we need to establish enforceable conditions attached to the taking, storage and distribution of said photos."

"Naturally," Matt replied. "I wouldn't have expected otherwise. What ideas do you have?"

"We need to have penalties in the event of unauthorized release of those photos. I'm warning you in advance, these penalties will have to be steep."

"I'm fine with that," Matt said, sensing that he was winning her over. "I can keep it in an encrypted password-protected directory. What kind of penalty do you have in mind?"

"$100,000 per release to the public."

"Adele, be reasonable."

"I am reasonable."

"You agree that the most likely scenario in which the photos will be released will be by accident. If a photo is released by accident or through no fault of my own, this sort of penalty would seem excessive."

"Well, I will have discretion to waive this penalty," Adele said. "But $100,000 for invasion of privacy is not unreasonable in today's legal world. This dollar amount needs to be specified in writing. Second, you need to give me a document attesting to your security procedures and the names of all devices you are storing these images."

"Listen," Matt said. "I'll agree in theory that you should be entitled to a large sum if a data disclosure results in invasion of privacy. But it's only reasonable that the amount be tied to my negligence and malice in making the photos available. Suppose a person holds me at gunpoint and demands my password. Suppose someone breaks into my computer in a way that couldn't have been anticipated or prevented. Certainly it's not fair to hold me accountable for that."

"Why the hell not?"

"This agreement presumes that you are allowing the taking and storage of photos to be allowed in normal situations. Compensatory damages seems reasonable; consequential damages are not. Perhaps if there were malicious intent, punitive damages might be justified, but it is doubtful that even in my anger I would ever resort to that."

"If you want your dirty photos, you should have to pay the penalty for breach of privacy. It's nonnegotiable. If my photos are released, how do I know it was an accident? How do I know that it's not an act of revenge?"

Matt smiled. As good a lawyer as Adele thought she was, she was no

match for his vast experience at litigation.

"I'm surprised that you have so little faith in the court system as to require something more than compensatory damages in the event of a privacy breach."

"It's not a matter of how much faith I have," Adele replied. "I just know that going through the court system for redress in this private matter would only increase my hypothetical victimization. $10,000 for every photo which is revealed to the public – accidental or not. Non-negotiable."

"Adele, you know I love you. You know I wouldn't do this maliciously. I totally understand that you want a sizable penalty as a deterrent against a data breach. But a penalty of $10,000 per photo will have the same deterrent value as $5000 or even $1000."

"How do you know that? For all you know, the harms to my career and personal life could well exceed that amount – it depends on my professional advancement, the nature of the photos and the scope of the exposure."

"Adele, I agree that right now we can't anticipate the full extent of any harm. But rather than make an arbitrary value now – which will probably be inaccurate – why not set a more reasonable penalty, and then allow you to sue for compensatory damages. If the photos were pilfered through no fault of my own, you might even be able to make a claim against our insurance policy. Tell you what. Just to be agreeable, I'll sign on to $1,000 punitive damages for each non-malicious exposure of a photogaph – up to a maximum of $50,000."

"No way," Adele said. "If you say I need to sue for compensatory, that means the penalty will have to be higher. $5000 per penalty, with a maximum of $200,000."

"A penalty of $5000 per photo is ridiculous. You would bankrupt me! It won't even be necessary because you'll retain the right to sue for compensatory damages. Let's be reasonable. I'll agree to a penalty of $1500 per photo …just to be cooperative. Total max out at $75,000."

"Ok, how about $3500 per photo?"

"$3500! That's impossible."

"Then, we don't have a deal," Adele said, smiling. "And we won't be having sex tonight…."

But Matt was impervious to these tactics. He would not cave – though when the evening came, and Adele slipped into bed with her naughty nightie, it would be hard for him to last the night. No, she was trying to manipulate him! All he had to do was to stay firm (mentally that is), and eventually she would compromise. After all, Adele was hurt too by

depriving both of them of sexual activity for tonight.

As he read his John Grisham book in bed, Adele gave him a kiss and went under the covers. Maybe he could change her mind ….

The next day at breakfast Matt presented a counterproposal (and yes, his general horniness last night led him to cave just a little). "In the interest of not turning this disagreement into something which might affect our marriage (much less our bedroom behavior), I'm willing to increase the penalty of no-fault exposure to $1800 per photograph. Maximum of 180,000."

During this Adele had been sweeping the kitchen floor. She paused and sighed. "This again? $1800 penalty for releasing an embarrassing photo seems way too low. I said $3500 before. $3000 per photo is as low as I can go."

"But that's ridiculous!"

"Sorry!" she said, kind of enjoying herself.

"I didn't want to bring this up, but last night wasn't easy for me – or us. This is silly. I like doing these sexy photos – I realize that you may not understand it, but I'm trying to work with you to ensure that your interests are protected. I want you to be happy with the arrangement. It's extremely unlikely that these photos will ever get released, making the issue completely moot. Ok, I'm willing to up the penalty fee to $2000 per photo. But only because I think that the exploration of sexual passions is inherently a cooperative and beneficial activity which is integral to our marriage. Just because I am sexually attracted to you and like taking photos doesn't mean you should exploit it for monetary gain."

"Wait – So now *I* am exploiting *you*?!"

"In a way, perhaps."

"Matt, I'm sorry that protecting my right of privacy and redress makes you feel 'exploited.' But no court in the land would agree with that characterization."

"Ok, maybe it was a poor choice of words; my main point is that in a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship, there is no need to set damages in advance."

"I'm sorry," Adele said, "but I think $3000 penalty per picture is not excessive. I'm not trying to take advantage. I just think it's fair."

They didn't talk until Matt went to the study to catch up on email. Fifteen minutes later, Adele slipped in and kissed him gently. Then, massaging his shoulders, she whispered. "I guess I could live with a $2000 penalty for involuntary exposure for each photo, up to a maximum of $200,000."

Matt smiled, glad it was over. He had won. Within 10 minutes, Adele had agreed to a $2000 payment up front, plus 1000$ per year while the photos are kept in his possession. Ostensibly the $1000 would be used for her to buy sexy outfits – though Adele didn't have to commit to using it for that purpose. They also agreed if the photos were released accidentally and though no fault of his own, the penalty would be $2000 per release, up to a maximum of $200,000.

"As we agreed," Adele said, "I should have full access to the photos at all times along with the right to delete any photo."

Matt kissed her. "That's not fair," he laughed. "If you had the right to delete any and all photos, that would defeat the point of the agreement. The only condition under which I might agree to give you the right to delete something is maybe for artistic reasons – if the lighting were bad, or the photo was unflattering."

"That's what I mean," Adele said. "I just want to delete photos which are artistically bad."

"Well," Matt said, caressing her back. "It's nice to say that, but then you get into subjective questions of aesthetics. How do we really say which photo is 'bad'? Maybe you will say a photo is ugly while I might say it is raunchy in a beautiful way."

"All I really ask is that you get rid of the terrible photos."

"And all I really ask is that you don't delete any photo without checking with me first. Maybe I might be able to help you understand why the photo is in fact interesting or beautiful in some way."

"But I have final sayso, right?"

"I don't see why not," Matt said. "My main interest in preserving your beauty in an enduring and aesthetically interesting way. I would welcome your consultation and input."

"Excellent," Adele said. "Before I agree to that, are we agreed that you forfeit all rights to the photos in the event of a separation or divorce?"

Matt smiled. "Be reasonable. I guess I can live with the fact that you can seize control of said photos in the event of a divorce. But if we are just separating, there's still a good chance that the marriage will recover, and I don't want to forfeit rights in the meantime."

"What do you care? Isn't the marriage more important?"

"That's a blunt negotiating tactic. Can't you say that about any matter we are disputing?"

"Ok, in the event of separation, I may choose to take control over the photos, but I am not allowed to destroy the photos until the divorce degree has been signed."

Matt smiled diplomatically. Even though he could live with that offer, he knew that the photos had value apart from (and even after) the marriage. Having access to these photos after the dissolution of a marriage would be an important matter for him. Although he could possibly copy photos into an undisclosed location later to ensure against deletion, this was not an optimal solution because it meant having to violate an agreement. Besides, even if a breakup ended in a very messy way, Matt would never dream of using the photos to humiliate this woman – or any woman for that matter. He knew that. And probably Adele realized that also. At the same time, he couldn't blame her for wanting to protect against that possibility. Fortunately, he knew his lawyering skills were good enough to come up with a solution.

"I understand that if the marriage were officially dissolved, you would have a vested interest in protecting yourself against loss of privacy. You might bear such animosity towards an ex-spouse that you couldn't imagine allowing this person to keep these intimate photos post-divorce. But for the moment I'd like you to entertain the idea that post-divorce the photos would continue to have value to me. And this value – is mainly of a prurient and perhaps sentimental sort to me – might have economic value which could redound to your benefit. I might be willing to pay a reasonable sum of money to have continued private access to these photos after the divorce. After all, I was the one who "made" these photos and owned the copyright to them (she began to interrupt) even though as the model in these photos you would have some claim on their future use. Still in the event of a hypothetical divorce, you might find that allowing controlled access to the photos post-divorce might be something you'd be willing to grant in exchange for some kind of compensation."

Adele looked at him in amazement. Then she laughed aloud and glared at him again. "Are you serious? Why would you care so much about this?"

"You as a lawyer must know that sometimes a client has interests or concerns which to the outsider or even to her legal representation might seem odd or irrational. That does not make these concerns illegal or unnecessary or irrelevant. As long as there are no legal violations, the provision is legally enforceable, and both sides have freely entered into the agreement, it should not matter how ridiculous a term is – as long as both sides have agreed to it."

"You're a loony, do you know that? Why do you care so much about a bunch of dirty photos?"

"Artistic photos," Matt corrected. "Our sexual inclinations are what they are. I do not apologize."

"But that doesn't mean that everything needs to be written up in legalese," Adele said. "Rights can still exist without needing explicit guarantees."

"But that is precisely the point of agreements: to guarantee that certain rights are preserved."

Adele was getting exasperated. "You are trying to turn this into a case of intellectual property when this matter clearly falls under the purview of family law." (Adele, Matt knew, was an expert on family law). "I am not an adult model or any kind of model. I would never consent to this sort of agreement unless it supported the overall marriage. For that reason it is ridiculous to divorce IP concerns from the role that such photos might play within a relationship. This is an agreement between lovers, not business people."

"Don't worry," Matt affirmed. "I definitely appreciate what you are doing for me." He didn't want to antagonize his future wife; at the same time, he knew that he was the better negotiator, and his ego was massive enough to feel that he could persuade her to do anything as long he didn't overplay his hand. It was true: he did have a thing about dirty photos; he used to download thousands from various places, savoring their anonymity and deriving voyeuristic thrill from seeing so many with a few mouse clicks. Sure, perhaps some of these photo dumps he collected were of unsuspecting girls who never realized that their images could be distributed so easily. On the other hand, he could tell that a significant number of woman in these photos seemed to enjoy being photographed and even being made to perform sexual acts around other people. That had always turned him on immensely, and while he was dating Adele, he would fantasize about photographing Adele in all sorts of lewd poses, even before he had managed to seduce her.

Adele was prettier than any other woman he'd dated, and even before he decided he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, he realized that it was vital for him to capture her youth and beauty when it was still around. Right now, she was ravishing to look at; she would never look more ravishing, and even though looks would fade, it mattered a great deal to him that he (and Adele too) would have a record of her unbelievable beauty during these early years of adulthood. Assuming that the two of them remained happily married for decades, it seemed to Matt a profound tragedy if later on there would be no private record of her past physical beauty which he could refer to during private reveries. It was as if he were compiling some secret testimony of Adele's loveliness which he could introduce into evidence at some later time in the unlikely event some

opponent tried to claim otherwise.

Adele, Matt knew, was no exhibitionist. She clearly understood the risks of creating salacious images of herself in digital form. About most matters Adele was smart and prudent, careful to avoid stepping into situations that could spin out of control or subject herself to unnecessary risks. It took multiple entreaties before Adele would agree to go down on him. Adele was certainly kinky enough to try such a thing; she liked to share some of her crazy sexual fantasies with him and even liked to initiate, but she was also strong-willed enough to resist any arrangement which proceeded on someone else's terms. In business settings Adele was easygoing and generous and thoughtful, but she wasn't somebody that you could bend to your will. It was futile to try.

But Matt was a good lawyer. He had already persuaded several juries to award to give multimillion dollar awards to clients. Even more challenging, Matt had successfully convinced stubborn clients to accept a reasonable settlement offer even if they felt entitled to more.

Besides wanting the photos themselves, Matt realized that his ultimate motive may simply have been to test her boundaries, to persuade her that his kinkiness was normal and healthy and reasonable. He wanted to convince Adele that letting her guard down occasionally was a good thing. When Adele interned at his law firm, he was immediately drawn to the way she stayed out of the limelight. Matt was used to being dominant in groups of people (even among lawyers), but he couldn't even engage in small talk with her. Adele was courteous but aloof, avoiding the typical parries of social reciprocity which arose between unattached males and females of a certain age. Perhaps she was just shy; no, her shyness was a deflection technique. She could be pleasant and gregarious when she wanted to be; at one meeting, she presented a summary of case law to the senior partners with such deftness and humor that she bowled over everybody in the room. It impressed and delighted the senior partners so much that they practically were ready to offer her a position on the spot.

Afterwards, as Matt left the meeting with a senior partner, he said, "That was a good summary Adele gave. She has good research skills."

The other man chuckled and said, "Not you too!"

"What do you mean?" Matt said.

"Take a number. Let's just say, you're not the only one impressed by Adele's 'research skills'. What am I talking about? You're the one who's single, not me. Carpe diem, but –" the partner paused and decided not to say what he was going to say for fear of being misconstrued. "Good luck and tread carefully."

Part of the problem was that Adele wanted to be respected for her work and ideas rather than just being a pretty face. (Actually people at the firm respected her work a lot). But Adele had learned over the years to downplay her femininity in professional settings, and that is why some people found her manner to be dry and aloof. But Matt saw through this charade and through persistence was able to persuade her to go out with him. When she agreed to an outing that was unambiguously not work-related, it was not until after he had agreed to all of her conditions and rules about interactions outside the office. Lawyer-types tended to be that way – Matt had dated a lawyer once before – but Adele's terms and conditions went beyond the customary; Matt half-expected her to whip out some pre-dating agreement which he would be required to sign before she even gave out her phone number.

To secure that first date, Matt had been happy to go along with all Adele's terms. If they ever became romantic or even intimate, he knew that these conditions would melt away and that compliance was the initial step to consent. Not just Adele's compliance, but his as well. He understood why it was necessary to agree to Adele's initial conditions, especially because he was already a partner and Adele had more to lose professionally from a romantic disappointment. What Adele didn't understand (and he already did) is that despite Adele's associate rank at the law firm, the moment they stepped outside of the office, they were equals and indeed, Adele had more leverage in the romantic transaction.

So during the first few dates he wined and dined her – staying on his best behavior and not trying to rush the seduction. To the initial conditions she set forth, he stuck to the letter. He never let on at the office that they were dating and never contacted her cell phone even though most work colleagues thought nothing of texting each other when at the courthouse. No photographs of any of their dates, no mentions on social media or even in email. They almost never talked at the office except in the presence of others. After they had gone on several dates, he agreed reluctantly to stop going out for drinks with other employees after work. At first, he treated it as a joke, but he realized that Adele treated it seriously and was paying close attention to how assiduously he abided by her terms. So he met the terms 100%. In fact, their dating didn't lead to a relationship for several months; the slow pace drove Matt crazy, and he would have preferred to spend more time together, but he abided by her timeline as best as he could.

They had known each other for three months before Matt asked her out. They dated secretly for three more months before becoming romantic

(although that delay was partly the result of a big work project and other scheduling inconveniences). After they became romantic but before sleeping together, Adele said it was time for her to notify her boss at the firm, and Matt agreed. Even after that, their romance was not widely known at the firm, but at least he and Adele could go out to lunch once in a while, thank god. A month or so later, they had slept together; by that time, everyone at the firm knew that they were an item; so it was not a huge surprise to anybody when after a three day weekend, they announced their engagement.

That did not mean that the relationship was without incident or conflict. They argued – or debated – about almost everything. The tone was always polite and respectful (at least to onlookers), but these "discussions" would often go on way too long and end unresolved. The subject could be something trivial – choice of restaurants, which driver at an intersection was supposed to yield, whether more extremists were conservative than liberal. Also, on gender matters: whether men had less discipline than woman, whether men relied too much on power and status in the workplace, whether evolutionary biology accounted for woman's conservative approach to life.

To outsiders, these discussions seem antagonistic and mildly uncomfortable to witness. But for Matt and Adele, this was ordinary conversation and even a little fun. The back and forth sometimes wasted a lot of time and had destructive potential, but for the most part it was just how these two people talked to each other. Even in romance they remained somewhat adversarial, though in the bedroom they didn't do much arguing (much less talking). Matt actually enjoyed the verbal parries, and found it both playful and stimulating. Adele didn't need to argue; in fact, she probably preferred going through the day without arguing at all. But she didn't mind disunity and being challenged; she even felt it was necessary to be skeptical of whatever her fiance (or anyone) was saying. Matt liked to argue about absurd topics for the fun of it, and sometimes Adele indulged him, but sometimes found it pointless. At some point, she felt, one side had to accept the legitimacy of the other's viewpoint; perhaps in fact they both were right … or neither of them were. For Adele, argument was a means to an end, never an end in itself.

For Matt, everything was negotiable; Adele agreed that everything could be negotiable but often two sides with different interests didn't have to be so adversarial to find an optimal solution.

An entire week went by before Matt mentioned the dirty pictures again. That Friday, he called to say that after work he would stop by a computer

store to buy storage equipment for the photos. "Maybe later," he added, "we can review the photography proposal so you can sign off on it."

"Sure, whatever," Adele replied. She didn't even want to think about it.

Later, while Adele was preparing dinner, Matt readied a little "show and tell" for Adele to demonstrate that he had met all her conditions for the agreement to be signed.

After they ate, he showed her two storage devices and explained the features: the encrypted file system, the private address on the LAN, the log files of the file server's http accesses.

Adele wasn't really interested in the technical stuff, but then said, "Wait, is this on the Internet? I thought we specifically agreed that no photo would ever be stored on the Internet cloud – not even for backup. That's non-negotiable."

"No, no, no," he assured her. "Nothing is on the Internet or the cloud. This is just a wireless way to view them on a local file server."

"But what devices will be able to access them? How do we know the neighbors might not have access? Or that you are downloading them onto your phone from work?"

Matt smiled. He had already anticipated every one of these concerns. "Only white-listed devices with specific MAC addresses would be allowed to access these files, and the file server blocks the outside-facing port."

He pointed out the network configuration page and various technical details.

Adele was still skeptical. "How do you know a visiting person couldn't be surfing from your iPad and accidentally stumble upon the repository? Or that a vulnerability could let someone hack into it?"

"I've already signed up to receive announcements of firmware updates. At some point we have to trust that you and I wouldn't provide access to these devices to other people visiting the house. But they would still need to sign on with the right user name and password. Also, they would need to know the right hostname, and I doubt that any of our friends are sophisticated enough to sniff out network shares."

"And what guarantees do you have that the photos can't be emailed to somebody?"

"You can't! I mean, the memory card from the camera – when inserted into the laptop – is configured to upload directly to the local file server without being stored temporarily on the laptop. If necessary I could sideload them to the laptop to do photo editing. If I had to do that, they would reside in a password-protected vault on the laptop."

"So what happens to the memory card after you upload files to the file

servers?"

Matt smiled. "To tell the truth, I never thought about that. One solution would be to use a specially marked memory card to store everything. I suppose I can keep it separately in the safe – along with other valuables. After I have uploaded files to the two file servers, I will completely erase the card's contents. So the memory card will stay either in my camera pack or inside the safe."

"What if your camera pack is stolen?"

Aha. Another scenario that Matt he had not anticipated. "I could keep the memory card in the safe when the camera is not being used and wipe it clean before every photography session. That would make it impossible for anyone to steal the pictures from more than a single session."

"So is the memory card password-protected?"

"No. Normally you can't protect contents on a memory card, but I can't envision a scenario where the photos will remain on the memory card after they are uploaded to the file server."

"How sure are you that deleted files on a memory card cannot be restored?"

Matt laughed. "Perhaps there is a Windows utility that lets you erase the memory card more thoroughly. I'll look into it. Adele, look, I realize that you have valid concerns about privacy and security. But I can't offer 100% security. Nobody can. At some point you're going to have to trust me. We will be getting married soon, and we will have to trust each other through thick and thin."

"Why do you have two devices?"

"That's so you will always have a backup in case the other one fails."

"How much did all of this cost?"

"Each device costs $100 and the memory card is about $5 when it's on sale."

"You spent all that just to be able to take and look at your dirty photos?!"

"That's right."

"I'll ask again: why?"

He smiled. "It's not complicated. I'd like a way to remember your beauty. Every day you I look at you, and it turns me on. I want a way to remember every part of you – especially the most private. I'm sure you will appreciate my efforts later. Even the most kinky photos will be taken for one reason: because I love you and want to love you for the rest of my life."

Adele laughed skeptically. "This is crazy. I mean, what if I wanted to take explicit pictures of you?"

"I'm actually ok with that," he said. "Take as many dick pics as you

want."

Adele appreciated the offer, but they both knew that nude pictures of a woman were prized significantly more than those from a man.

"Well, I suppose these security protocols are adequate," she said.

"We are agreed then?"

"Sure."

"And tomorrow I'll give you a sheet of paper with your credentials and file addresses."

"Ok."

"And I'll have the draft of the agreement to sign."

"Is that the one you showed me last Sunday?"

"Yes, but I need to add the part about –"

"Oh, that's right."

Adele thought it would take a few days for Matt to ready the paperwork, but he sprung it on her over brunch at a patio cafe the next day. They had been discussing possible vacation destinations and Adele's ex-roommate when Matt slid a manilla folder on the table.

"What is this?" she said.

Before he had a chance to answer, Adele glanced on the front page. "Oh, is the …."

"Yes, it's all ready," Matt said.

Adele sighed. She had already resigned herself to the fact that she would have to play this little game. But honestly, she didn't understand why it had to interfere with the day's Eggs Benedict and smoothies. She glanced over her copy of the four page document, with a small green signature tape marking where she was supposed to sign.

"Did you make the changes we discussed last night?" she asked.

"It's done," he said.

"What about the language we agreed to about arbitration?"

"Yes, it's there," he said, "Top of page 2."

"Well, I guess we have an agreement," Adele said with a chuckle. "Here goes nothing."

Matt gave a smile was either smug or lascivious or both.

"Are you ready to take your first photo?" Matt had taken out his mobile phone.

"What – do you mean here?"

"Certainly," he said, "You look great now, and the sunlight is perfect now."

"But here?" she said, looking around. Most of the cafe's customers had already left, leaving only 3 of the 15 tables occupied. "Seriously, why don't

we do it tonight instead?"

"Now is better."

"Wait, you haven't paid the advance yet. The agreement doesn't go into effect until you do that."

"Very well, then," Matt said, clicking a few buttons on his phone. A minute later, Adele's cell phone made a ding confirming the deposit of money. "All done."

Matt began taking lackadaisical photos of the patio yard and Adele. "Very nice," he whispered. "Can you move your chair back?"

"Ok."

"And now spread your legs."

Adele smiled and pondered her predicament. Would she have to go through with this today? After brunch?

They had spent almost two weeks negotiating which photo requests she had to comply and which she could ignore. In the end, Matt had conceded everything, letting her decide the time and place for all photo shoots. The idea of posing in public had come up during the negotiations, but as soon as it had become clear that she would insist on full control, this issue became moot. Adele had agreed hypothetically to pose for outside photos (perhaps against her better judgment), but only on the condition that she had full veto power.

They had both agreed informally that posing once a month (and occasionally once every two months) was minimally adequate. But nothing was in writing – despite Matt's valiant efforts to get her to agree to suitable language. No, there would be no statement of principles! No, there would be no clause obligating her to pose if a significant period of time had elapsed without posing. At first, Matt had suggested that if she didn't pose after 2 months, there would be "consequences" (mainly reductions in the annual "honorarium" for her participation). Then, he changed the clause to 3 months, then 4 and finally 6. Eventually she agreed to a clause which resulted in the forfeiting of the annual honorarium if she didn't agree to a photo shoot for 7 consecutive months during a year – that was only fair. But she wasn't conceding anything; to the extent that the photo shoots constituted a service and she was being remunerated for said service, it seemed silly to demand the right of refusal while also demanding the right of remuneration.

Truthfully though, Adele wasn't interested in extorting her fiance while she played his little game – as long as she retained the right to decline.

Matt held out his iPhone ready to take a photo. "I'm waiting."

"You didn't ask nicely," Adele said.

Matt smiled. "Adele, will you please open your legs so I can take a sexy picture?"

Adele had an idea. She took out her own phone, and said, "No, you first!"

This caught Matt offguard. Then, realizing it might not be so hard to comply, he glanced around to make sure nobody was looking in their direction.

"I can do that," Matt said, "but you have to realize that my shorts make it hard to do. The only way I could do it is to open the zipper and –"

"Ok, do it – and let me get a picture of little Ralphie poking his head out."

Matt smiled, looked around again and quietly unzipped his shorts. Then he shifted around and cupped his right hand over that area. Then after double checking his surroundings, he slowly raised the same hand to reveal an inconspicuous digit that was his penis.

"Show me," she said laughing.

Although Matt kept his hand over his lap, then revealed his penis, which was barely visible.

"It looks like you're not yet hard. Is that right?"

"Well, give it a few seconds," Matt said. The two of them sat in silence, casting random looks around. To a bystander, the two of them might have looked like a bored couple waiting for the waitress to bring the check. Ten seconds later, Matt said, "Ok, I'm hard now."

"Show me."

Matt was about to move his hand away from his zipper when a group of people walked by. Matt and Adele smiled quietly as they realized how close they had come to creating an incident. Eventually the group had found a table and were scanning the menus, so Matt removed the hand covering his privates and said, "Ok, look."

Adele still was holding her phone and took a few casual pics, including one at zoom.

"Were you going to ask me something?" Adele said.

"Will you please let me take some sexy photos of you?"

Adele delayed giving an answer just to enjoy his impatience. "The answer is no," she said sweetly. "This place is not secluded enough. Maybe we can find another place in the park with fewer people."

"Ok," he said. "I'm ready to leave anytime you are."

"Let's pay the bill, but first, let's make something clear. Whenever you ask for a photo session and I decline, I want you to thank me. Say, 'Thank you for considering my request.'"

"Adele, thank you for considering my request," Matt said.

"Anytime," Adele said, kissing him gently.

After Matt paid the bill, they went walking along the park trail. They weren't speaking, but Adele mentioned something about work and then about something else, then they returned from talking about sexual matters to talking about the usual humdrum of living. At one fairly isolated spot, Matt said, "How about here?"

"No, let's try another," she said. Then leaning against him and brushing her hand against his shorts, she said, "You're still hard, aren't you?"

"Yes," Matt said.

"That's good. Because now I have a new rule. You can't ask me to pose for photos unless you are hard yourself and ready to be photographed."

"Ok," Matt said. This was a new development in the negotiations – something Matt had not foreseen – but Matt was warming to the idea. Finally, they came to a nice spot in the woods where there was a tree trunk to sit near. "Is this good?" Matt said.

"Sure, I can sit against the tree. Is the lighting good here?"

"It's perfect," Matt said.

Adele sat with crossed legs in front of the tree, trying not to look provocative.

"Are you hard now?" she said.

"Yes," he said solemnly, almost ready to unzip again.

"Matt, this time I want to see you when you are soft. Only after your 'soft soldier' is ready to show himself, then you can ask to take a photo. Is that clear?"

"I guess."

They sat in silence looking at each other. Adele was beginning to enjoy this. Adele began talking about a new show on Netflix. Matt was nervous and reluctant to talk, but eventually he tried to participate – if only to distract his brain from the hardness between his legs.

Then out of the blue, Adele declared, "I wonder if Jason has a big cock."

"Excuse me!?" Matt said. Jason was a (married) neighbor who lived in their condo complex. On one occasion Adele had alluded to Jason's attractiveness and it had become a privately shared joke. But this was the first time she had been so blatant about it.

"Jason's cock. I wonder how it could feel to have it in my hand. It would be pleasant, don't you think?"

"I could not say," Matt replied, his own hardon – which had been slowly settling down – was again fully erect.

"How's your guy coming along. Is he a soft soldier yet?"

"Not yet," I think.

"Let's give it 5 or 10 minutes. I can't wait all day." She smiled at him sweetly, ready to engage in a staring contest.

He needed to stop thinking about sex to lose his erection, yet Adele seemed determined to do everything to keep teasing him with sexual thoughts.

He wanted to ask her whether she was sexually aroused, but didn't want to talk about anything sexual while he tried to deflate his physical reactions.

"Finally," he said. "It's gone now."

"Is your man a soft soldier yet?"

"I think so."

Show me!" she said, taking out her phone.

Slowly he revealed a soft head of a penis peeking out from his unzipped pants. Adele clicked a few random photos.

"Does your soft soldier want to ask me something?"

"What? Oh, yes… Are you ready to take photographs?"

"I suppose so," Adele said. "Does your soft soldier promise to stay hidden while we do that?"

"Yes," Matt said, zipping himself up.

Adele looked around and then slowly moved her knees apart on the ground to and moved part of her shorts away to reveal bright purple bikini underwear.

"That's good," Matt said as he quickly reverted into the photographer role – repositioning the angle several times and adjusting the settings. Adele kept her hand over her shorts, occasionally stroking the skin underneath it, as the iPhone clicked a dozen times.

"Is this what you wanted?" she asked.

"Perfect," Matt said coolly. Indeed, it was; it was what he had always dreamt of.

She put one hand over her bra and the other hand over her pussy and sweetly looked at him. Matt liked the way she was exposing herself, but it did seem out-of-character for someone like Adele. Having a fiance who acted slutty sounded great in theory, but in practice it seemed almost disorienting. Still, it was nice for the eyes. Very nice.

"Would you turn around and expose your behind?" he said.

She smiled, looked around to make sure there were no onlookers, turned around and bending against a tree, quietly slid her shorts down partly and then moved her panties a few inches to reveal the top of her butt crack.

"Can you pull them all the way down please?"

She smiled and then said in a low voice. "Not here. Not in public."

Matt was going to say that it wasn't a big deal, but Adele continued.

"On the other hand, since you said 'please' so politely, I guess I can accommodate your request. Let me make sure the coast is clear."

She looked around for a few seconds, then said, "I'm only going to do it for a few seconds, so be sure to snap your photo quickly. Ok?"

She calmly looked in all directions, then in an instant she dropped her shorts and panties a full foot or two, exposing everything to him and the camera.

Matt clicked the camera shutter repeatedly. About 5 seconds later she pulled everything back up, and returned to her previous sitting position.

"Are you happy?" Adele asked.

"Yes," he said, and it was true. He was happy and really turned on, even though it ended so quickly. "Would you like to try to do it again?"

"Not really," she said. "Even though I have agreed to pose occasionally for you, remember that I get to decide the time and place. Doing it in public today was just a one time deal. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sure," he said, continuing to snap photos. "Could you … touch your breasts?"

"I think we can do that," she said, putting her hand on her heart and slowly moving it around. She stopped, was about to say something and then quickly undid her bra which she removed.

"This feels much better, don't you agree?"

"Absolutely," he said.

"Here," she said, handing the bra to him. "Can you put that in my purse?"

"Sure," he said, reaching over and dropping it inside.

Once again, Adele put her hand underneath her blouse and started stroking the nipples. He continued taking pictures. Everything was quiet except for the wind, faraway sounds of birds and highway traffic.

Adele was not doing anything in particular – not even looking at him while he snapped his pictures. Instead, she stared at the distance, relaxing.

Then she said, "can I have my purse?"

"Sure," he said, handing it to her.

Matt knew that Adele's purse was like an extra appendage – she could barely spend a minute without grabbing something out of it. Adele had never worried much about fashion or looking stylish, but she recognized that the legal profession required impeccable dress, so she shopped at the

most expensive stores and bought brand-name outfits that were nonetheless generic and dull – usually a solid color – sometimes bright and violet or red. Adele already had the perfect figure, and so no matter how understated her clothes, people (and especially men) always noticed her appearance. Recently though, when a friend of hers bought a expensive leather bag by a famous designer, Adele liked it so much that she insisted on finding the designer's name so she could buy one for herself.

A week later, she had acquired a gold and olive handbag by the same designer. It looked spectacular. People always noticed it when she walked around – at least in the first few months anyway. Later she admitted spending $700 on the purse (and that was the sale price!) That was more than double what she had ever paid for a bag. Still, she brought it everywhere with her to the point where it almost became her trademark.

She put the purse over her lap and slid her hand underneath her blouse again. Tilting her head against the tree, she gazed at the sky, continuing her movements. Then she slid her other hand beneath the purse. She kept gazing ahead. Matt could see that the hand was moving behind the purse; it was caressing all kinds of hidden places.

"Are you getting this?" she asked, looking over and noticing that he was too dazed to take pictures.

"Yes, of course," Matt said, resuming the taking of photos. She repositioned herself, spreading her legs wider while her purse continued to block what her hand was doing underneath.

"Matt, I have one request."

"Sure."

"Take all the photos you want, but only until I say stop. When I do, you should close your eyes – keep them closed!"

Adele gave herself some slow caresses. It was incredibly sexy. Adele wasn't looking at him or making sexy expressions, but just kept her eyes closed, oblivious to the camera clicks. The camera could only record the lascivious way she held the purse between her legs. It looked like her purse was making slight jerky movements – as though a mouse or squirrel were rustling through it.

Matt kept clicking the camera until Adele said "Stop – now close your eyes." Matt closed his eyes and waited for Adele's instructions.

He was still holding his camera, but felt silly holding it when he had nowhere to aim it. "Can I open them?"

"No, keep them closed please."

He put the camera down and sat waiting. It was not a windy day, but Matt could hear the slight rustling of trees. But Adele stayed completely

quiet. What was she doing – was she getting off?

A long time went by, at least a minute or two. Finally, Matt could hear sounds of Adele moving around and finally a sigh. "Ok, open your eyes."

To Matt's surprise, Adele was already dressed and standing.

"That's all for today."

"That's all?"

"Naturally."

"Maybe one last picture."

Adele nodded wearily, then gave an artificial smile. "Ok, quickly."

Matt took a quick photo and they began walking back onto the trail.

"You kept your eyes closed?"

"Yes."

"The whole time?"

"Yes."

"That's good. If I found out you had been peeking, there would be hell to pay."

"Sure."

As they drove home – listening to vapid pop songs on the radio – Matt thought about the photos inside his camera. They would probably look incredible – especially in that natural light. But why had Adele asked him to close his eyes? Honestly, the thought hadn't even occurred to him to peek. But now that she had mentioned it, she seemed reluctant to be watched during the throes of pleasure. Or she was just teasing?

Before they had become an item, Adele had seemed like such a cipher. Now that they had been together awhile and become engaged, Matt still wasn't sure what was really important to Adele and what was some sexy mind game. Had Adele hoped to catch him peeking? Was this just some obedience game – and an excuse for her to catch his disobedience?

If that were so, Adele truly didn't understand him. Even in his kinkiest moments, Matt was a stickler about rules and persuading people that what he asked for and what they themselves wanted were one and the same.

Perhaps it was his legal background – or his fetish for understanding the intricate nuances of any rule, but the thing that terrified Matt the most was being caught red-handed – running a red light or swiping an extra food sample at the supermarket.

But why had Adele ordered him to keep his eyes closed?

Over the next few days Matt would keep pondering that question until he could figure out a way to watch (and even photograph) her climax without violating their agreement. It was a challenge, but Matt was confident that he could figure out to persuade her to consent; it was just a

matter of determining what leverage she was most susceptible to.

Later, as he pored over the photos of that first day, marveling at how such a reserved girl had exposed herself so brazenly, he wondered about the best way to gain leverage in future negotiations.

Adele, he was sure, would be such a pushover.

September 27 7:00 PM EST

A young man's erotic letter to a married woman invites her to partake of forbidden dreams.

Marcela,

I'm still thinking about last night's conversation. Obviously I had hoped for a different response from you, but I'm still glad we could speak candidly. When you said you'd been expecting my outburst, I was surprised; who would have thought that the leanings of my heart were so obvious? If you turned down my affections, at least you took great care to soften the blows -- a gift from a true friend.

I won't dwell on my disappointment; I don't want to be negative. From the time we first met, you became a fixture in my thoughts and dreams; although I accept your decision, I can't help wondering what might have happened if I'd met you before your husband did. Okay, this is foolish speculation. Perhaps I was too eager to read discontent in your marriage. All Brian cares about, you once said, was fishing and football games. You said he wasn't the Romeo type, although you admitted you loved him. To marry is to commit to a single dream and watch it disintegrate, slowly and

imperceptibly, until not even a shadow of its original form remains.

That's not necessarily a tragedy. Perhaps your original idea of a Romeo needs to be sloughed off before reconstituting into something more enduring. Romeos do exist, but only if you let them breathe. After all, the nacho-munching football-watching man on the couch is only human. Occasionally tiresome, yes, but not a bad man, and certainly capable of romantic surprises. If you can be patient.

Perhaps my fear was not that you would say no, but that you would say yes. I don't know. I'm awash with rationalizations and liable to convince myself of anything. Hours before we talked, I was so hopeful, so utterly and foolishly hopeful. For a single erotic embrace with you, I would have traded a warehouse of dreams; a dream, even if it perishes, remains fully intact for a single hour or moment; and even if this moment expires, the dream can be painted upon the caverns of memory many many times. If this is foolishness, at least you can't accuse me of persisting in a hopeless passion. Dreams remain even when hope fades away.

You have made your choice, and I will abide by it; in retrospect I should have anticipated it. No dreamer abandons a safe reality for something more fleeting. But a dream, once confessed, becomes a neurosis or even an obscenity. An unrealizable dream, if confessed, poses more than a challenge to reality; it turns into a threat.

In this case I must be honest because I have tried to be honest all along. Marcela, how should I put it? I have dreamt many times of kissing you, no, of making love to you (why pretend? We are adults). Now that you have told me exactly where you stand, I cannot dream the same way. I can no longer recreate the erotic image of a Marcela who loves me. Why? Because it would be untrue. And now there is factual confirmation. To conjure a living presence of unsatisfied desire being satisfied requires a degree of plausibility which now is impossible. Thus I mourn not only the possibility of love but the passing of a dream.

Yes, I'll meet other people, and someday I will marry. In a few years our lives will diverge, and last night's confession will be a minor episode in a diary no one will ever reread. We have never loved and never will, but can we still share a dream? You said, forget it; drop the subject; don't even think about it. I'll try. Honestly, I'll try. But I don't want to lose dreams of what might have been, and I don't want you to lose them either. A person who stops dreaming about the impossible discovers that nothing remains to look forward to.

You probably are right that your marriage will endure and that this boredom is only a passing disaffection. And probably you are right that an

extramarital affair would destroy many things — a friendship, a marriage, a psychic balance. I trust your practical caution. Passion must not cause pain. I agree; from now on, we probably should avoid being alone together. It would only remind us of the "thing." It's better to bury it, to pretend it never happened (and really, nothing did happen). Friendship, if carefully nurtured, can outlast passion.

For your husband, give him all the love you can give; give it without hesitation or restraint; let your husband adore your womanhood and answer your physical and emotional needs.

But for one hour of one day I will be dreaming of only one thing: you and your erotic secrets. For that one hour I want you to join me in imagination, to embrace my hungers, to feel my excitement. For one hour let me strip you of inhibitions and abuse your generosity; show me everything and deny me nothing. For every other hour of every other day of every year, go on with married life; forget about me, and I'll try forgetting about you. But in that one hour-- **September 27 of every year between 7:00 and 8:00 PM EST (that is midnight to 1:00 AM UTC)**, remind yourself; release yourself. Remember the men you won't seduce, the men who long to seduce you, the men who will always look at you with longing and regret. Let me be one of those men or (if you want) the only man. Sail through turbulent waters. Tether yourself (however tenuously) to marital fidelity. Let passion become undone. Unplug your ears. Open your eyes. Surrender to your longings — don't resist! And please – for one hour of one day of one year— let me drown in your infinity.

Lisa and the narrator debate the value of passionate confessions. "They are a sign of weakness," she says. (**Read more**)

The Ice Cube

A young man has titillating dreams of bikinis,
sweaty limbs and ice cubes.

Passion is not hot; it is cold. In the languorous summer heat I sit caressing my limbs with lotion as bright bikinis run past and dive into the water. Sunglasses reflect the light but not the heat; I take a sip of iced tea and try holding a book above my head to block the sun's glare. My arm quickly tires. I put down the book, close my eyes and inhale the chlorinated odors of the swimming pool. My consciousness swims in a bright orange darkness and relaxes to swimming pool sounds: bouncy diving boards, screaming children and swimsuits dripping on the way to

towels. Sweaty moisture glazes my chest and drips into folded crevices of skin. I reach for the suntan lotion, but before I open it, footsteps run by and dive into the water, raining a giant splash upon me. I awake and spy the culprit – a short freckle-faced kid who by now was at the other side of the pool. I dry myself and see climbing out of the water a tall dark-skinned girl whose small teenage breasts jut unashamedly out of her water-shrunken bikini. She returns to her towel, dons sunglasses and walks to the water fountain while I stare at her spongy buttocks knocking against one another. Without embarrassment the girl pulls up the bottom half of her bathing suit, covering the pale strip of skin made accidentally visible. I turn over on my stomach and massage my back with lotion. Now a group of adolescents are jeering at another girl for not jumping into the water. "Come in," one boy yells. "It's not cold!" The others start splashing wildly at the girl, causing her to scoot a safe distance away. Eventually the teens forget about her, and the girl removes her T-shirt, glancing about to make sure no one was watching. She approaches the water and samples it with her toe. "It's cold," she says. Still wary of being splashed, she goes to the shallow water and descends the first step. Moments later she steps down to where the water reaches her upper thighs. She shivers and hops around with hands high in air, as if groping for a life preserver dangling from the sky. Adjusting to the temperature (but determined to keep her blonde hair dry), she descends to the bottom step, bringing the water level to her small bosom. But it is too much; she hastily retreats to the top step, watching the swimmers half-enviously. Go ahead, I think to myself, do it. But she just stands there, gliding her hands over the water. Then, with sudden bravery, she steps down, all the way down, to the bottom step, biting her lip as she endures waves of cold flowing around her. Her neck remained barely above the water, with her hair mostly dry and tucked behind her ears. Even that does not stay dry for long; with a single jerky bob, she disappears under the water, finally succumbing to the aquatic rape that was all the time inevitable. Immediately she shoots out of the water, breathing heavily, her hair tangled around her face like seaweed. I take a sip of iced tea, tilting the glass so the ice cubes can fall one by one into my mouth. But the melted cubes are melded together; they stay at the bottom of my glass until I give it a few hard shakes.

For years I've performed a ritual with every woman I've made love to. With Cynthia, as with the rest, I did it unthinkingly, almost religiously, while never sure of its meaning. Cynthia was the love of my life in senior year at Emory. She had stellar SAT scores ("Tests – they're so inconsequential!") and was captain of the school's fencing team

("Sometimes a foil is just a foil," she used to say). The first time I saw her, she was dueling an invisible opponent in the library parking lot, gracefully twirling her foil and lunging ahead like a crazed ballerina. A few weeks later, we were naked in bed, legs brushing idly against one another. Passion was three hours over – or was it about to begin? Kissing her lips lightly, I nudge her to lie on her stomach, which she does without opening her eyes. I want her; I savor her beauty as the tips of my fingers graze over her soft back. Cynthia sighs, and I rest my head against her shoulder, feeling the rise and fall of her respirations. Even in the dark I could see her lazy nipple, relaxed but alert to the possibility of arousal. Her eyes were closed: not asleep, but lulled into erotic repose. When she was like this, I would take out an ice cube – smuggled from the freezer – and bring it to the base of her spine. When she felt it, she would wriggle out of position and issue a panicky laugh. An instant later, I had already removed the ice cube and was guiding her head to the pillow. Her naked body lay before me, presenting an almost infinite surface for the ice cube to explore. Slowly, so slowly, I touch her ankle with the ice cube, holding her legs to keep her from pushing away. Again she laughs, and the ice cube inches up her thigh to the borders of her pubic hair. I stop, take the ice cube away and stare at the smiling face of the woman I adore. Cynthia giggles, bracing for the next icy touch; for 20 whole seconds I sit beside her, watching her tense expectation. Next, her elbow; the ice cube skates up and down her arm, leaving a cold trail of tears. "Keep your eyes closed," I whisper, lifting the ice cube to the other side of her body, catching the drips with my hand to disguise my next move. The ice cube flits against her fidgety breasts, electrifying points of contact, inching towards her pubis, encircling it like an inward-moving spiral, while she lies there, absorbing these sensations with pleasurable impatience. As the ice cube begins its final descent – can I confess this? – I feel less like a giver of pleasure than a torturer, a man extracting confessions of pleasure to gain a vital piece of information. But even torturers can be artists; their brushstrokes are careful and controlled; their motions enhance the helpless yearnings of the human figure in all its beauty. The key to the ice cube was movement – staying too long in a single place would numb instead of excite; I had to keep it moving, making sure not to miss a square inch of skin. I brought the ice cube over her furry pubic jungle, providing not merely precipitation – she was already damp with anticipation – but a sudden frost. Her body recoils, and she warns with her hands not to remain long. But the ice cube remains, searing all sensation and wresting a hollow sigh from her lips. Finally, sensing victory (or was it defeat?), I lift the ice cube, (now a third of

its original size) to her lips, which she accepts like a gumdrop. Looking into my eyes, Cynthia wraps her arms about me to offer a weary, grateful kiss. But instead of kissing me, Cynthia keeps the ice cube between her teeth and moves her mouth over my shoulders and chest. A cold tingle moves over my body as I try not to flinch. But that's what she wants, and that's what I do when she locates a tender patch on my side. She moves to my face and deposits the well-traveled but ever-diminishing ice cube into my mouth. The gesture catches me off-guard; it fills me with repulsion and excitement. Cynthia just grins. I bend over her lips to give the ice cube back. Her tongue accepts the gift but pushes it back to my mouth. Laughing, I try to kiss her, but Cynthia playfully pulls her head away. I hold her head so I can kiss her once again, pushing the ice cube back into her mouth. Cynthia accepts, and our tongues wrestle with each other, trying to present the other with the ice cube. Cynthia tickles my back, and in an instant, I let down my guard and allow her to push the ice cube into my mouth. Betrayed, I try spitting it out, but she covers my mouth with her icy cold hand. Unable to resist, unable to open my mouth, I could feel Cynthia's lips moving down my stomach and the ice cube dissolving in my mouth.

Lisa and the narrator debate whether sexual submission is actually a turnon. "Isn't it sexier to have two people actively participating?" Lisa asks. (**Read more**)

The First Time, the Last Time

11 Episodes of Lust and Disillusionment.

The **first time** was a moment of great anticipation for Teddy. He'd been trying for weeks to get Carol in the sack, and after it was over, she put on her T-shirt, kissed him and said, "So now will you let me drive your Lexus?" She was only half-joking.

The **last time** was pro forma. A few minutes after turning off the light, his hands moved down her body. She wasn't particularly in the mood, but was a good sport at least. It was a no-frills fuck lasting ten minutes. She let him initiate; after it was over and their breaths had settled down, he said "Thanks," and she replied, "Not a problem!" with a cheerful but perfunctory tone.

The next morning she found his body cold and dead from a nighttime heart attack. Should she tell people the circumstances? No, that would be indecorous. She maintained a respectful silence at the funeral, feigning a romantic bond that outlasted death. Some might call it a beautiful way to die. But was it really? She never really gave a damn about the relationship. Now that he was dead, she revisited that last evening. Why hadn't she

made more of an effort to infuse passion into what would be a man's last day on earth? When had she stopped caring?

From that point on, she was generous in bed, offering the passions she had neglected to give Teddy when he was alive. Her lovers were appreciative, but none realized that every time Carol made love she was trying to make love to a dead man.

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The best sex Alan ever had was with a crazy blonde named Sue. She was self-centered, chatty and dismissive towards anyone born into wealth. When they had first made love, he alternated between thinking, "I can't believe I'm doing it with such a gorgeous woman!" and "I can't believe I am putting up with all this woman's shit just to fuck her." She smoked and cursed and badmouthed everybody. The president? A loser. Her boss? A pretender with a sexist attitude. Her ex? A cheapskate judgmental bastard. Her dad? A loser who happened to make good investments. (Behind his back, Alan knew she probably badmouthed him as well).

But the sex was great…wild and great! Sue talked like a porn star: Give me that fucking cock! Fuck me, you bastard! She always managed to be on top when the orgasms were near. She barked orders and pushed against him and even liked to sit on his face. When she came, she softened and curled beside him, picking up a cigarette. "You passed," she said sarcastically, before refilling her drink.

In other words, Sue fucked like a man. She looked like a princess (and in fact was treated like one by male onlookers), but once she opened her mouth, most people (even men) found her obnoxious and avoided her. She had (to his knowledge) not a single female friend. This made her insecure. She was acutely aware of the effect her slender body had on men, but she rebelled against it like an angry pop star. Her breasts were perfect. He longed to keep his hands on them when while she complained about random things (her father, the car, the customer representative who had slighted her). Still, for a few moments after making love, she was quiet and serene and good-natured; for those brief moments she was Aphrodite – if only she wouldn't spoil it.

The **last time**. It was 9:30 when she called him out of the blue. She called to be picked up from a party. By now he'd grown used to these random phone calls. She didn't use email and rarely answered texts; she called people at her convenience. These long gaps in communication caused him to forget how irritating she could be. When she called, it was always to

request something (usually to pick her up somewhere or drive her to a club). He gave up scolding her. He knew that whatever happened that night, at the end there would be sex – hot sweaty sex – she would be lying next to him at his apartment, letting him do whatever he wanted. It was an endless cycle, starting with the random call and ending in the morning when he called a cab to take her home. Sometimes she appeared at his place in the morning or even in the middle of the night. Then for weeks (or even months), he would hear nothing. He didn't exactly enjoy this pattern, but every time the phone call came, he would remember the feel of her skin and the certainty of having her luscious body crawl into his arms again.

He loathed her and lusted for her simultaneously. He didn't consider Sue a girlfriend, just an amoral girl he liked to do things with. Until a real girlfriend came along, there would always be Sue for a pick-me-up. Every time he became convinced she was gone for good, she would reappear. The phone call would come, and in an instant he rearranged plans and picked her up – wherever she was. When they met, she always looked amazing. That last time she greeted him with a kiss – and muttered "why are girls who work at department stores such cunts?"

This pattern continued between 2000 and the 2003. Although the intervals grew longer, Sue would call him at the most inopportune (and maddening) of times. He even enjoyed the anticipation. (Alas, this was indeed the last time – she fell in love with an Armenian businessman and never called or thought about Alan again).

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The **first time**, she agreed without feeling strong desire. They had been arguing about the relationship, and Tom was complaining about how she had been leading him on. He was in fact correct. She liked him, but was unsure of whether she loved him; she needed more time. The male attention was nice, and Tom was a genuine guy, but his certainty that they belonged together seemed premature. How do people know? Finally, after confronting her with his passion, he criticized her for putting him off; was she just making excuses? Rather than admit uncertainty, she let her guard down and let him take her. A part of her enjoyed it (especially the fact that Tom had stopped complaining), but a part knew she was doing something stupid. Having a boyfriend was nice, but who was Tom anyway? Did she really tolerate his mood swings? The first time they did it, she had experienced a genuine orgasm, but deep down she knew it wasn't really love. Sure, he felt love's ardors, but he seemed so devoted to fulfilling his

passions that he hardly seemed to care about her own. In bed, she dreamed about men from her night classes; it was easy to compose a list of more compatible men. Tom was too serious, too goal-oriented; he didn't relax, he didn't do anything without a day's worth of deliberation. For Tom, everything had to be part of a plan; she couldn't stand that! He never got around to enjoying life and didn't understand that she just coasted along. He was not handsome; maybe that was the problem. But it was not the only problem.

The **last time** was actually the fourth time. She had wanted to break things off from the start, but the next day, he was so attentive and charming that she was willing to entertain the possibility that she had misjudged him. Tom had a heavy-handed charm; he would treat a girlfriend well – too well in fact. The problem was – well, what was the problem? He was too demanding; he expected too much from her; he expected her passions to resemble his. He had complained that she was never really into it in the bedroom, that she wasn't being open enough. The truth was, she was indifferent. She couldn't help it. That last night was awful; he was driving his love into her, and she simply waited for it to be over. Tom wasn't a bad man; he just didn't mean anything to her. She hated pretending. The sooner she got away, the better. Tomorrow she would leave him. She would stop by Tom's apartment and tell him quickly, then leave. He would demand they talk, and maybe she would talk a little – how could she explain? All she wanted was to finish things. In the meantime, she lay in bed, watching that pathetic hulk of a man sleep peacefully. His partially nude body aroused pity in her; this would be the last night she would see it, and truthfully, his body had never wronged her. It had always treated her limbs gently and respectfully; it could not help being attached to such a dull and annoying person. But she had to turn away. This person – this body – meant nothing to her. She didn't want to have second thoughts. Two days from now she could stop feigning desire. Then, for once, she could be free … and alone.

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The **first time** was in her boss's condo. She – a lifeguard – was 16. He said he was 26 (actually he was 30); They worked late at the swimming pool. He was handsome and well-muscled and friendly. They kissed briefly in the car, something which made her heart flutter. One day a storm came into town, and they had to shut the pool down. When he invited her to his apartment to wait the storm out, she was nervous and excited. Was he

going to kiss her like before? He fixed shrimp scampi and wine and they watched a DVD on his couch. His hand slid over her knees and eventually their arms were wrapped against one another. At first, she resisted his sexual touches, but tried to keep an open mind. He was handsome after all.

"Do you want me to put it in my mouth?" she asked after they were naked on the bed.

He laughed at her precociousness. "What do you think?"

The movie – in case anyone is interested – was *My Cousin Vinny*.

The **last time** was noon on a Sunday four weeks later. She had knocked on his apartment door; he had grown weary of her surprise drop-ins, but let her in without complaint.

He had been paying his bills. Financial documents and hand-written budgets were spread across the table. She dropped her shorts, grabbed a wine bottle from the refrigerator and headed to the bedroom. She ended up waiting for 10 minutes. "Just one more minute," he called out from the living room. After she disrobed and grew bored with self-caresses, she started ruffling through old magazines beside the bed.

Finally he arrived, and the orgasms came in no time at all.

Afterwards, he sat up, and said, "This can't continue."

"What?" she said, not realizing what he was talking about.

"We shouldn't be doing this anymore. I know; I like you a lot, and I think you're great and sexy. But I'm your boss, and you're still in school, and gosh, you have to know this never will work out."

She giggled and crawled atop him. "You are going to be my slave."

"Sure," he said, bringing her closer. An hour later, she lay next to him, relaxed and satisfied. Eventually he kicked her out to buy tires. At the time his manner of breaking the news seemed bashful – or even charming – but over time she regarded it as heartless – even cowardly. He was a bastard – no doubt about that. And every time she seduced another man she assumed he had a heart just like Jimmy's.

*****

The **first time** was at his hotel on a business trip. Both were in town for a sales conference. Sally was a career-oriented person with a passion for golf. Jack was an ex-Marine gung-ho about fishing. They hooked up quickly and effortlessly. Both had extensive sexual resumes, and this encounter would become another thrilling addition.

The sex was outstanding. He knew the hookup had been only a weekend

thing, but his mind wandered during idle moments to thoughts of Sally. She was definitely the most interesting woman he'd met in a long time. He quickly found her number and texted a mesage; she sent a flirty reply. Later he called her during a random moment. When Sally answered, she was stuck in traffic, eager for distractions. The problem was that she lived in Portland, Oregon, and he lived in Alexandria, Virginia. Arranging a meeting would not be easy. They continued the phone calls for months, talking about whatever popped in their minds – sex, job, family, weekends, vacations … she even mentioned her dates with various men. Very casual. But every time he heard her voice, he wanted her; he remembered the intimate parts of her body and the way she giggled when he teased her with caresses. On the phone she seemed indifferent to the romantic meanings people gave to sex. And yet, during that initial weekend, she had eagerly crawled into his arms.

The second (and **last) time** was at Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Unbelievably it took eight months to arrange. She said she was busy, and maybe she was. Remember, both were in sales. They made love in the afternoon an hour after he arrived. After a quick nap, they were at the beach again, swimming and sipping iced teas. Later that evening, when they embraced, he realized that Sally lived only for the moment; the future did not concern her. He had assumed that her romantic cynicism was just a pose, but at Myrtle Beach she scowled at the mere mention of a relationship. She was there to drink and be silly and see the beaches. She was fun company and incredibly sexy in bed… but after Myrtle Beach, she seemed inclined to drop him from her mind. When he hinted at the possibility of getting together more often, she laughed.

"Don't fall for people Jack," Sally said. "One thing leads to another, and before you know it, you will have thrown your life away for nothing. Is that what you want – to live in boringsville with the well-trimmed lawn and 2.5 children, wasting your weekends at your kids' soccer matches? By the time you realize your mistake, it will be time to buy a cemetery plot."

"Do you really mean that?" Jack asked.

Amused by the earnestness of his question, Sally kissed him lightly. Then she whispered, "Jack, watch out – or the pod people will get you too."

Jack sensed the futility of trying to get a straight answer from her. Does the heart always need to attach to something? Or can it be content to catch and release? 14 hours from now they would probably say goodbye for the last time. There would be no breakup because there was nothing to break from. If he brought up the subject of romance, she would find the idea ridiculous.

During breakfast they ate and talked and laughed like a couple exuberant with love.

*****

The **first time**, her husband was away and Travis had agreed to stop by. She was ready to give herself from the moment he stepped foot in her apartment, but she hid it successfully during dinner. Travis never suspected. He was charming but nervous. Later, they sat out on the porch, and he put his arms around her. She didn't object; her body was tingling with excitement. Finally, he put his hand through her blouse, and she lost it – she totally lost herself in the thrill of the forbidden moment. Every time he advanced, she lost herself – it was terrible! Yet she had been anticipating this moment for weeks – never actually believing it could happen. When he took her, she grabbed him and helplessly followed his movements. He gave a boyish cry, and she caressed his neck and shoulders, feeling his head upon her breast. She was content and felt so … naked! She had never known that raw desire could seize her so easily … or that transgression could be so easy, so dramatic and so beautiful.

The **last time**, he had brought Chinese food, with the intent to spend the evening with her. But no. The sooner she told him, the better. Travis wasn't hurt, just mad at her for ruining the evening – and the Chinese food. She knew it was the right decision. The guilt of having betrayed her husband weighed on her, something Travis couldn't understand. Travis held her and pretended everything was the same, but she repeated it louder: she owed it to her husband to break it off. Her husband was a decent man, and yes, she loved him, and if he ever found out, it would devastate him. "So you're going to cut everything off," Travis said, "just like that." "That's right." "No more – never again?" "That's right." "So today is the last time we'll be together." "That's right." "I tell you … this just sucks, do you know that?' She said nothing. "But tonight we're still going to do it." That hadn't been her plan, but after she saw his angry outburst, she knew she had to grant him this.

In five minutes they were in bed, and Travis was ransacking her body. While they made love, she wondered where her husband was and what he was doing – what would he say if he knew? Travis needed her like an animal, but it was not love. Love was a grand feeling and a sad obligation. She had never actually wanted to hurt her husband, but as soon as she realized the enormity of her mistake – this was their marriage! – she wondered what had caused her to risk so much for so little. Now that she

had done it, she feared the random possibility he would stumble upon some evidence and confront her with it. She would be unable to deny it; the lies had been killing her. She had wanted to grow old with her husband, and yet her weakness was now the main obstacle. She didn't care about her husband's shortcomings as a lover – she just didn't want to lose him. Travis was nothing – he was self-centered and embarrassing to look at; Travis demanded too much of her attention without having any right. She couldn't wait to get this man off her back. Tonight Travis was hypersexual, overcompensating, determined to take her ruthlessly. And though she couldn't wait to eliminate this man from her life, she could not deny the final pleasures he had forced her to feel.

With relief she returned to her role as faithful and loving wife, but even around her husband she could never extinguish the memories of those secret exhausting pleasures.

*****

The **first time** she made love to Scott, she acted more out of curiosity than attraction. They met professionally (she worked in Internet marketing), and when he asked her out, she was caught off guard. She said yes just to avoid being put on the spot. The first date was all right (he had kissed her at the end), but afterwards he refused to leave her alone. His number kept showing up on her cell phone. Eventually she agreed to another date … if only to ask him to stop bothering her. But that second date turned out to be delightful – what a surprise! He was coming onto her; at first it amused her, and throughout the night she played with the idea of having a fling. Would it be that awful? Could they be discreet? He was not bad looking and had impeccable manners and offered her all kinds of compliments (more than previous boyfriends). By the end of the night she knew she would go to bed with him; when he made his move, she would let herself go. Her lower body was ready; when he laid her down and took her, she did not immediately experience ecstasy; that would come days later. But that first night was still interesting and entertaining; it reacquainted her to the sensation of having a man beside her, hearing his sexual jokes, feeling his fingers slide beneath her arms. It was not romantic perfection, but it was comfortable enough. She enjoyed his eagerness for intercourse and his melodramatic orgasms and the helpless way he hung onto her afterwards. He was too overbearing, too sarcastic, too self-assured about his opinions. Maybe she could grow used to these things. These were annoyances, not serious character flaws. The next

morning he offered to run across the street for bagels. He would never be a dream lover, but at least he understood the etiquette of seduction.

The **last time** they had made love, she had not felt any pleasure. Perhaps Scott had noticed, but tactfully said nothing. She lay in bed all night wondering. Why did her life feel so empty? She sorted through the details of her life. Was it her legal career? Or Scott? Was it the fact she was 31 and still unmarried? Was it her finances? The fact she never had time to relax or do volunteer work? The fact she hadn't lost those 15 pounds? In her mind she went over each possibility – weighing the evidence like the lawsuits she analyzed at work.

It was only two or three years later that she realized the problem had not involved Scott at all. He was a well-meaning person who had showed up at the wrong time. Her mood swings caused her to magnify the negative in everything; it had caused her to avoid the irritations of intimacy. Eventually, through therapy and meditation, she learned that relationships didn't need to disintegrate, that love was elusive – but never impossible. Despite past disappointments, she still wanted it – and that was good.

*****

The **first time** happened over 10 hours. It started at a movie cinema. It was mid afternoon, but once the lights went off, Jim's hands were all over her, exploring regions normally out of bounds. She said nothing and occasionally returned his hand to his lap (whenever she needed a break). Later at a sandwich shop, they dissected the film and laughed as though the caresses had never happened. Down the street was a small chapel she'd never visited. Jim had never been there either, so they decided to peek inside. The place was deserted and lit only with candles at the altar. "It's nice," she whispered. "I don't know why I've waited so long to go inside." Then he kissed her. It caught her by surprise. She gladly reciprocated, but for him it was more than a kiss; it was an outburst of violent need. She broke away. "You have a one-track mind," she said, walking across the pew. Then he kissed her again, holding her, moving his hands down her body and underneath her clothes. It was awkward and uncomfortable for her, but the caresses continued. She was enjoying them … it was intense, but she had to break away. "Please," she whispered, "Can't we go somewhere else?" "Come here," he said, and she did. Instead of saying something, he laughed and slid his hands up and down her blouse. Thirty minutes later, they were making love at his apartment. They did so for hours; it was

exhilarating and exhausting. As she lay in his arms, she recalled the groping in the chapel and how helpless it had made her feel.

The **last time** happened after an argument. Jim was a tightwad who complained about the credit card bill. Because she worked in the legal profession, she needed a professional wardrobe – something Jim didn't comprehend. He mentioned the clothing purchases just to antagonize her, triggering another pointless argument. Later in bed, he would make amorous advances as though nothing had been wrong and still expect her to be enthusiastic. Usually she just turned away and let him suffer, but on this occasion, she was tired and actually longing for physical release. While he made love to her in a mechanical way, she enjoyed the sensations for what they were, aware of how little she really liked him.

They broke up after he refused to show up for her father's 60th birthday party. This began a series of arguments about how she was trying to control her life, how he thought work was more important than family, how she always tried to make him feel guilty, how she thought the world revolved around her, how she didn't understand the pressures of running a business, how he was a workaholic, how her nagging drove him crazy, how she wouldn't have to nag if he helped out once in a while, how her family thought he was a flake, how she was always committing him to things without asking. Three days later, they broke up. They had broken up many times, but this time was the last.

Donna and Jim were as dysfunctional a couple as you could get. In fact, Donna was always cursing Jim, and every time Donna popped into his head, he became angry. It is no exaggeration to say that they hated one another during the relationship and even more afterwards.

But sexually they were totally compatible. Jim found Donna voluptuous and kinky; Donna thought Jim was a "real man" (at least more than the one she later married). Her delicate body consumed Jim's attention (especially when it awaited his next penetration). In the first few months the word "love" punctuated conversations; but after a fight (where he complained about her cell phone usage), she made him spend the night at a friend's house. The next night, he stopped over to pick up some things, and as the argument resumed, he touched her neck. "Don't do that again!" she snapped. "What – you mean this?" stroking it again. She didn't resist; he was too fast; he knew her points of weakness. The passion was still there; why deny it? From that point on, they knew better than to use the word love except during rare ceremonial moments.

A year later Donna married a lawyer with a 5 year old from another marriage. Jim hooked up with a girl two years later, but they never

married. Although both Donna and Jim cursed the time they spent together, it had been the best sex of their lives. Later partners were loving and more compatible emotionally, but lousy lovers. If only David could take charge like Jim! If only Susie could be as spontaneous and uninhibited as Donna! But these were minor complaints. Both accepted their choices and were happy. Both Jim and Donna were comfortably ensconced in warm and emotionally-fulfilling relationships.

Once Donna and Jim passed one another at a mall without realizing it. Ten steps later, Donna paused and turned around. Was that *Jim*?! All sorts of emotions ran through her: anger, sadness, excitement and even affection. She had been fond of him – in a way. Had he noticed her? It wouldn't hurt to say hello; she was married and could be civil at least. But no – the emotions were too strong; she was shaking! She had no idea how he would react or the stupid things she might say. She was curious; had he remarried? She wanted him to see that she was happy after the divorce. But had she really gotten over him? She remembered the way he turned everything into opportunities into sex. Maybe he would try again; it would be fun to laugh in his face.

All she really wanted to see his reaction at running into her. The surprise, the curiosity, the lust. But she couldn't spurn him until Jim actually approached her. After Jim went into a shoe store, Donna walked by the shop window in plain view.

Or so she thought. In fact, Jim wasn't facing the window. So she passed again. Now he was talking to a store clerk. Damn. Okay, she'd walk by the shoe store one last time. If Jim didn't look, she would give up. When she walked by, Jim was sitting down, waiting for something, facing a different direction. Jesus. What was his problem?

Later, when making furious love to her husband, all she could think about was that heartless, horny bastard.

*****

Her **first time** with Scott was at a beach house. She met him through an online dating service. His initial email was light-hearted but unremarkable, but his online profile was intriguing. He ran a business and liked water skiing. He seemed ambitious and restless. His photo was handsome enough, but in person he looked even more attractive. She couldn't believe her good luck. On the second date, they drove to the beach in his jeep. When they were in bathing suits, her eyes were drawn to his muscles; she liked his easygoing manner and the way he reaffirmed his

desire for her with a smile or a casual touch against her arm. In the water they kissed almost immediately. Underneath his bathing suit, she could feel his erection against her back and the warmth of his chest against her shoulders. They were in the middle of a public beach, surrounded by kids and families and all kinds of people, and yet their embraces were hidden beneath the waves: rocking back and forth, they savored the closeness of their bodies under the water. Every few minutes a kid would swim by, and they would separate, but once the kid was gone, that magnificent embrace would continue. In the water, they were warm-blooded creatures with a natural tendency to flow into one another. It was an undeniable biological fact. In the silence, under the sun and surrounded by sounds of noisy children having fun, he was learning about her body's reactions. He was not so impudent to wind his hand underneath her bikini (although she wouldn't have minded if he had tried). Instead, his hands found the boundaries of her desire and rested there, until she no longer was sure if the advances were due to his desire or simply the rocking of the waves. That evening, when they ate at a nearby restaurant, he mentioned a nearby beach house which he owned jointly with three friends. Two hours later they were strolling into town.

"If you feel like it, we could stay overnight at the beach house and return to the city in the morning."

"That's presumptuous," she said with a laugh.

"No, that's not what I meant," he said. "I just meant that if it gets too late, we have that as an option. The beach house has two bedrooms and a fold-out sofa."

"It's always an option," she said playfully. The beach house was smaller than expected and minimally furnished. No one had been there for weeks. But Scott was proud of it; he brought out a glass of wine, and they sat on the sofa, making funny remarks and exchanging caresses. They talked about prophylactics while he stroked her underwear. Finally, they were in the bedroom, and he was going down on her, kissing the insides of her legs, making naughty remarks. The sensations were delicious, but he kept interrupting with random commentary – he adored her legs … the beach was crowded today … she looked sexy in that bathing suit …this beach house was an appreciating investment .. she reminded him of Julie Delpy … the neighborhood was full of military retirees. As her excitement grew, he veered off into a remark about California weather. Conversation was fine at the restaurant, but why now? Eventually he reached the clitoris and gave it a kiss, then made a snide remark about Hillary Clinton.

"Don't talk," she said, tapping his shoulder. "Concentrate."

"Sorry," he said, and when the conversation stopped, the pleasuring began.

The **last time**. She had gotten used to Scott's talkativeness in the bedroom; if that were the only problem, she could have dealt with it. But he wasn't really talking about anything; he was talking just to hear himself talk without any real desire to communicate. He never listened; he seemed clueless about how he annoyed people. He frequently answered the phone during meals or in the car to talk to a buddy or business partner. She would have to hear the whole inane conversation. When she explained how it bothered her, he apologized and made genuine attempts to change (at least in the short run). But after a while, another annoying habit would appear (which she'd eventually have to inform him about). Scott wasn't making her happy; he was simply appeasing her requests which he treated as inexplicable. She didn't like having sex with him. It sounded funny to say, because they shared a physical chemistry, but he never really seemed to know how she was feeling; he never noticed or asked. If she came, that was good, but he never seemed to notice unless she made an announcement. He talked in the bedroom not to express feelings, but simply to entertain himself with his thoughts. Mentally or emotionally they were never in the same place. She thought it was temporary, or that she was being unreasonable; but the longer it went on, the more she really hated it.

Scott wasn't a villain, just a fool. Everyone seemed to like him, and his prowess in the bedroom was undeniable. The last time with him was exciting (as always), but the enjoyment lasted only if he kept his mouth shut. Then, Scott would spoil the mood with some asinine remark, and she would turn away. Later, when he was snoring, she thought about random things. Would she break up with him or continue giving him another shot? Maybe they should see a counselor; no, they were too far gone for that. She should have never agreed to go to the beach house the first time they went to the coast. If only he could do something outrageous, she could use it as a pretext for breaking up. But neither of them really quarreled. Most of the time if she criticized his attitude, he just walked out of the room. He always took the easy way out. She didn't know what she wanted anyway. She let his arm rest over her breast; did she really mind? But this was not love; it was crazy. She couldn't deal with his shenanigans forever. Besides, she was still young. Men still found her attractive. Earlier today, at the car repair shop, a Mexican mechanic listened respectfully as she described her car problems. She didn't know much about cars, but when she described the problem in a vague and roundabout way, the man smiled and patiently

went over her options. This man was the kind she usually went for – not men like Scott. No fake chitchat, just respectful conversation. Was that really so hard?

(She sulked for two more weeks before breaking up with Scott. It was still the best decision she had ever made. She visited the car place several times, but the cute Mexican never seemed to be there. She would have liked to see him again, if only to replenish her dreams).

*****

From the very start Greg noticed Tracey's attraction to him. It caught him by surprise. Tracey was a lovely blonde with sensitive dreamy eyes. They met at a seminar and ended up at a coffee shop next door. Tracy did not talk much. Instead she asked question after question. He ended up telling his life story while Tracy listened and smiled. Was she flirting? No, she kept a serious tone, like a psychologist trying to diagnose an emotional disorder. The attention flattered him (she even enjoyed his dumb jokes) but he didn't feel at ease. She was sexy, but more concerned with assessing his personality than connecting. She was seeking something – but what? Inner strength, financial stability or simply a willingness to serve as a good husband. He didn't mind answering her questions, but she seemed too serious. They spent the rest of the night talking about personal beliefs – that was fine, but couldn't they simply have gone bowling? Despite the talk, Greg knew next to nothing about her. She grew up in Ohio and liked to draw and knew a lot about botany; what else?

Two days later they met downtown at a farmer's market by her apartment. They bought fruit and exotic berries, and he bought two pounds of a fish she recommended. He had originally intended to leave straight from the farmer's market, but she mentioned an art gallery that mildly interested him, so they headed there by foot – first dropping off the food at her apartment. By the time they returned, it was lunchtime, so they ended up at her apartment to cook the fish. She mentioned a movie by Kies'lowski he'd enjoy; minutes later, she found the DVD, and they sat on the sofa watching it. The movie was long and tedious; it involved a cute singer who loved a puppeteer and whose father had died. But once they settled on the couch and he wrapped his arm around her shoulder, the only thing he thought about was exploring the curves of her body. "Not so fast," she whispered. But when he gave her lips a kiss, she giggled. The French actress began singing, and Greg teased off Tracey's clothes. "Here, let me do it," Tracey said, dropping her brassiere and returning to the embrace.

He was ecstatic. With one hand he moved up and down her bosom and with the other he slid beneath her undergarments, finding a soft pocket of skin between her legs. As soon as his hand went there, she recoiled and settled slowly back, kissing him and beginning her own explorations over his skin. Minutes later, they were in her bedroom, settling into the thrillingly familiar rhythm of lovemaking. She accepted his penetrations silently, trying to hold everything in until that final perfect moment. When it arrived, she closed her eyes, leaned forward and collapsed so suddenly and violently that he ejaculated before he knew what was happening. An instant later, she started bawling, as though the act of sex has unlocked a hidden pain. But no, she was happy.

"Greg you are so good to me. Promise you'll be good to me."

"Of course," he whispered.

"I'm glad you're not like the rest."

"I'm not *that* different," he said.

"It's hard for me to open up with men."

"You were fine," he said.

"I just want this relationship to work," she said, snuggling into him. "It's just you and me against the world."

"I think that's a song," he said, laughing. She said nothing, but looked ahead, lost in her emotions.

The **last time** he was barely interested in sex. What was wrong? Nothing, he replied. It was nothing. She insisted on talking about it. He didn't object to discussions per se. But whenever they opened up a dialogue, it usually ended up with her crying at the end and his promising to respect her feelings. Yes, she was beautiful; that was why he fell for her. When she actually undressed and made love, they almost always had incredible sex. Her body was capable of giving and receiving lots of pleasure. Once the barriers were dropped, she grabbed at orgasms without shame. But everything had strings attached. To get her in the mood meant having to listen to her vague insecurities. She wanted to be told that she was pretty. She wanted him to promise that he cared about no one else. She wanted … oh, every time it was something different. Initially he put up with it – just to get her into bed – but soon he realized that she used the promise of sex to gain emotional support. If he made a sexual move too quickly, she retreated. Once, she even took his hand off her breast and said coldly, "You can't force intimacy unless you're willing to be vulnerable." I know, he thought, I just want to fuck! For him sex was a simple matter; it was free and spontaneous and unconditional. Yes, emotions were involved, and there was the thrill of two people helping one another

towards mutually beneficial goals. That was all. For Greg, recreational cooperation was how couples became closer. For Tracey, making love was impossible until she felt that emotional synchronicity. Orgasms were not mere physiological responses (yes they were!) She couldn't release her body to passion until their souls became naked. But emotional synchronicity (in Greg's opinion) was impossible. He wasn't cynical, just realistic.

They had talked about this very conflict many times. Talk, talk, talk. The more they talked, the less tempting her body became. She genuinely wanted to help out. Perhaps a couples counselor might have helped. But no – he couldn't deal with introspection anymore; that was playing her game. He wanted sex to be simple and recreational. Was that so hard? They had been engaged for six months – the marriage was supposed to be the summer of next year. But how could he deal with this…every single day of his life? The cost of desire would be a lifetime of having to deal with her emotional issues. It was a terrifying prospect. Maybe things would improve. But it had been like this from the start – had anything changed? For Greg this relationship felt very wrong.

Two years later after the separation, he longed for her – emotional baggage and all – had she really been such a witch? And she was a beauty; he remembered the plain sight of her pussy, the perfect breasts, the warmth of her insides and the way her hands moved nervously across his back. He had never encountered a woman who needed him so much and offered herself so completely. It was as close to heaven as he would ever come – but he had been too dumb to realize it. Yes, she was sort of crazy, but he could have dealt with the other stuff. And now it was too late; too bad they couldn't have become fuck buddies – or something like that.

*****

The **first time** actually lasted a week – the entire length of their honeymoon. They were Catholics committed to abstinence until their wedding day. Ironically, the last month before the wedding drove them crazy; everything they said or did brought them back to the distracting subject of sex. Just holding hands was a rude lascivious act which they were careful not to indulge in. His masturbations were furious and crazy; it was always about the night of June 18 and the certainty that they would finally be having sex, that finally he would become familiar with every part of her body and satisfy those sweaty needs. Getting married took on a new physical urgency. For a few moments he had even toyed with the idea of hiring a prostitute just to relieve the pressure of those final hectic weeks.

Yes, he loved Yvonne dearly, but when they finally met at the altar, the only thing on his mind was that he would fuck her senseless later that night. While the preacher spoke and she looked lovingly in his direction, he imagined that same expression on her face as she put her mouth around his cock. Even later at the reception when people were dancing and eating wedding cake, he was looking at her smile and imagining that same smile in the middle of sexual climax.

By the time they got in the limousine, it was 11:30 PM – and when they arrived at the hotel and walked down one of the hallways, Yvonne said in a low voice, "I know it's our wedding night, and we've been waiting a long time. But I tell you – I'm exhausted – I just don't have the energy – I got up at seven this morning; it's been so nerve-racking. Would it be all right if we just sleep tonight?"

"Just sleep?" he said.

"Just sleep."

"Of course," he said calmly. "I suppose it won't hurt to put it off another day."

"Thanks," she said, giving him a weak and grateful hug. The funny thing was, he didn't mind. As important as the sex thing was, he could see her exhaustion. He wanted it to be perfect too, and now it was even more important to make her happy. Let her come to him when she was ready – by tomorrow, he knew she would be. It would be a small sacrifice really.

A strange peace had come over him as he lay in bed waiting for his wife – yes wife – to emerge from the bathroom. Finally, she did, wearing a beautiful red nightgown bought precisely for that occasion. He watched her put away some things, and when everything was done, she lay on the bed facing him and smiled. "I hope this won't be too distracting," she said.

"Don't worry about me," he said.

They kissed and hugged briefly, and she quickly separated, as though afraid to excite him any further. But the kiss had already affected him; his whole body was now electrified, and he lay back, hyperaware of her breaths and curvy presence. He stroked her shoulder once, not to initiate desire – he had already agreed to call it a night – but to get her attention before she faded in slumber.

"We will have many lovely evenings together," he said, gazing at the outline of her body in the dark.

"Yes," she whispered slowly, settling into sleep.

The **last time** was several decades later. They had tried valiantly to make love, but his illness made it frustrating. Why had he even tried? It had to be the medications. His wife had been accommodating, but this was the third

time in a row they had tried. He liked her body and still felt desire but knew consummation was beyond his abilities. Was he even capable of an orgasm anymore? Sex was not really that important, but losing it was another sad milestone of his decline.

"I guess it's not meant to be," he told her.

"You worry too much," Yvonne said. "We can always go to the urologist again."

"He won't help," he said wearily. "Hell, I should just feel lucky to be alive." Yvonne patted his chest and leaned against him. "This could be the last time for us."

"Don't say that," Yvonne said.

There was an uncomfortable silence. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Oh, it's nothing," she said. "Just hold me now."

They pressed against one another, lost in thought. Half a minute later, Yvonne started giggling.

"What?" he said.

"It's nothing," she said, continuing to laugh.

"Please," he said, starting to laugh also. "What is it?"

"Do you remember…that hotel in Sarande, the time the bed broke?"

She was referring to a vacation they took around the Mediterranean, a night of their most adventurous lovemaking, a night of wine, multiple positions and things they'd never tried before.

"Does the memory of that night turn you on?"

"Sure … And you?"

"I remember it vividly," he said. "I remember that outfit you wore, the strolls we took afterwards to escape those unairconditioned rooms. I remember…"

The event was so far away, and yet once recalled it swirled about in their heads.

"There will be always be tomorrow."

"Maybe not," he said.

"There is always the past," she said, lifting his hand and putting it over her pussy, guiding him towards her desire. In a few minutes he heard her selfish pleasures and felt her hand grip his during the crucial moment of release. Her pleasure – and her pleasure alone – was the last vestige of their physical love.

"Was it good for you too?" he whispered, and she laughed.

"Who were you thinking about it this time?" he asked. "Was it David..or maybe Shelley?"

She laughed again. Shelley was a bisexual they knew decades ago, an

odd woman, a small joke they had. "Oh, stop it!" she said. "You're the only one I dream about these days."

"Really?" he said.

"Of course," she said, kissing him. "You're the only man in my life. And frankly, if we never do it again, it's not that big a deal. The world wouldn't come to an end. We still have each other."

"Yes, of course," he said. In truth, he didn't believe her. She must be trying to cheer him up. Over time, however, he began to see that her proclamation was the truth, that even without physical desire, love remains the same; their hearts were just as fragile and generous as the day they met. He feared for the future, the end, the onset of powerlessness. Would she remain at his side? Silly him, how could he ever doubt that? The number of days until his death were diminishing. His sexual prowess was a distant memory, but at least their erotic past continued to inspire orgasms in his wife. For now that was enough. Or was it? He didn't want to think of desire anymore, but the act of not thinking about something only planted the notion more strongly in his head. As she lay sleeping, he continued to be seduced by a series of teasing, unquenchable notions.

Should you ever date people who write erotica stories? Aren't they too cynical about matters of the heart? (**Read more**)

Essay: Pleasure Manifesto

Why pleasure can serve as a guiding principle for artistic creation and even for living. Part rant, part analysis.

I. Manifesto

Over the past decade, my fictional pieces have suppressed the idea of pleasure. Though it is true I have read and loved many novels, something has made me confiscate pleasure from my own writing. Pleasure in literature (I thought) is prostitution; it is pandering; it is narcissism, the admiration of one's reflection in a pool of water (the obvious response is to ask whether the narcissism of despair is any better). I search the literary arts for new elevating heights. I have noted the following effects:

….a suspicion that pleasure "spoils" the sense of the sublime. As a storyteller myself, I distrust overt attempts to satisfy readers' expectations. Such attempts seem as shameful as masturbation. Perhaps I simply view the

mechanics of creativity in a demystified sense. Because I am unable to respond to another artist's attempt to manipulate my emotions, I instinctively distrust literary pleasures as I would distrust the lie that porn stars perform only for the fun of it.

…the fear that pleasure will eventually overtake any other quality of an artwork. Pleasure, I once thought, was a terrorist threatening to blow up the Empire State Building. Its perpetrators could be accommodated perhaps, but never allowed to carry out their threats. Pleasure was thought to disrupt artistic balance.

…desire to be seen not as a prostitute of experience but as an innovator. The inspiration to create derives from the artist's (misguided) belief that it is possible to express human experiences uniquely, that there are stories, images and melodies waiting to be discovered. In fact, civilization overflows with enough artifacts to reveal the totality of human experience to those patient enough to look. Even Kakheperresenb's Complaint [1] that the enormous amount of "complaint poems" in ancient Egyptian literature left nothing else to complain about turned out to be uttered by several poets before. Storytelling is not magic; it is ceremony, a celebration of archetypal conflicts and resolutions. A creator's job is to *reintroduce* alternate ways of viewing and enjoying the world. The audience applauds the artist as a revolutionary; the artist takes a bow, trying to remember why the old pleasures repulsed him in the first place. For the creator, art offers new ways of tolerating (and even extracting joy from) the madness of living.

…the sense that pleasure is ephemeral, ideas eternal. On the contrary; ideas are limited by the cultural context; pleasure knows no bounds. Martians prefer pleasure to Marxism (or any Ism that Earthlings could devise). Laughter and bliss and ecstasy – they are universals. I admire Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* painting oblivious to the painting's mythological allusions. I admire colors, forms, focal points. I am struck by the sense (or is it fear?) that 25th century scholars will find our pornography more fascinating than our novels or poetry, reveling not in Fitzgerald's poetic despair, but Radley Metzger's restaurant of copulation.

…the sense that tension and conflict comprise the true measure of artistic quality. Nonsense! Pleasure is the exhalation of art; it is a continuous act of breathing; one could set records for holding one's breath, and all one would have done is prolong the agony of living.

We live in an age of spiritual uncertainty. Our minds are dulled by the mediocrity of the television, the unrelenting promise of contentment when we buy the latest Ford. At one time we used to enjoy the sweetness of

a peach, the lazy coolness of an afternoon. Back in those days, did desire even exist? Nowadays that peculiar creature is put in a cage and studied, measured, psychoanalyzed. Nothing is wrong with analysis. That is the affliction of our time, and we play the game like pros. But analysis creates distance, and pleasure is about connection, union, harmony. Pleasure is about grasping the cookie, not dividing each millimeter of movement into smaller sections and looking for answers at the subatomic level. The Buddha once said there was infinite pleasure in eating a peach. The statement itself is a classic Buddhist paradox. Naming a pleasure is to deny it exists. No, that's not exactly right. The naming process erases the memory of the sensation. We remember the pleasure of eating a peach until the time we realize we remember. Proust discovers the madeleine not through any conscious process but accident.

This argument produces a contradiction. Does Proust deface pleasure by writing about it? Does the pleasure of creating exist only for the creator (audience be damned!)? Obviously this is not true. People read about Proust's madeleine not to enjoy the madeleine vicariously but to see Proust's relation to it and to contemplate what objects might trigger such epiphanies in their own lives. The most revolutionary impact on porn on viewers, as Bernard Arcand notes, [2] is to inform them about the variety of pleasures and sexual possibilities that *can* exist. Porn can be criticized on purely moral grounds, but the more interesting question to me is whether the knowledge of new sexual possibilities caused by porn can makes us better lovers or better people or even happier people. Does the public projection of sexuality (through webcams, online fiction, chat or other multimedia) enhance sexual fulfillment or simply mask private unease? In using porn, the viewer isn't actually a participant of pleasure-taking, nor does he really imagine himself in the picture (although with technological advances, that could easily change). For the viewer or virtual participant, the mere contemplation of the erotic possibility is sufficient to bring satisfaction. Reality, of course, is irrelevant.

What the world needs is not less pornography but more. We need better ways to dream, better ways to envision our reality as comforting and reassuring. Current society is already a utopia; we have all the books we need, all the music, movies and food. Why does nobody realize that this world now is already the best of all possible worlds? Crime and poverty is there – yes, I don't need to be reminded. They are maladies that have cures. Let us not lose the ability to envision a time when these ills *no longer exist.*

With most of middle class America, we have to figure out how to sit back and enjoy things. Pascal once wrote that the biggest challenge of life

was learning how to sit still in a room. The self-contained world offers advantages, not the least of which is the ability to control incoming and outgoing signals to the brain. For the cocooned individual, the pornographic arts sharpen the focus upon the self. Religion on the surface appears to repudiate pleasure; Christianity, for example, is replete with lists of no-no's and pronouncements about why the self no longer matters or why it cannot be unleashed. But religion's main concern is devising alternate ways of enjoying life. It offers ceremony, songs, a momentary feeling of solidarity. It teaches us to find pleasure in morality, self-righteousness and spiritual transfiguration. The church's pornography is every bit as enticing (and every bit as man made) as those of other arts. The size of its congregation is proof of its allure.

We are oppressed not by organized religion, bloated government or disintegrating values but a culture that offers us shit instead of pornography. Look at TV – it's full of comedians who aren't funny and talk shows about breast implants and celebrity divorces. And movies – nothing but elaborately staged car crashes and arty mass murders. If sex is added, it's an afterthought, a fillip to more arty killings. Consider serious art: poetry, painting, film. What is serious art? Political buzzwords, laborious explanations, top-heavy social messages. It's not their ideologies I find so abhorrent. It's that I am forced to do so much thinking. And music. Everything produced in the last 10 years sounds the same, and everything produced before that time is out of print or too expensive or owned by media conglomerates. My only musical comfort is hearing Karen Carpenter on the supermarket loudspeakers and Beethoven on the cell phone ringer.

We must not reject American culture; we must embrace those parts of it which reintroduce pleasure to a nation of zombies. We must raise our voices to call for the pleasures we have been deprived, the pleasures for which we are rightfully entitled. We must request…no, we must DEMAND that society give us more of those things – those cultural products whose sole aim is to produce pleasure. Give me porn stars! Give me *Far Side* comics! Give me Charlie Chaplin! Give me PacMan! Give me *Green Eggs and Ham*! Give me mud wrestling! Give me psychedelic drugs without side effects! Give me Harlequin novels! Give me Chuck Berry! Give me Pink Panther movies! Give me *I Love Lucy*! Give me giant tubes of toothpaste! Give me bluegrass music! Give it to me, everything, give it to me now!

Sex vs. Violence: Two Hedonisms

Art has many functions, not just one. People read books to be entertained or educated or titillated or horrified or simply distracted. Beauty or aesthetic release is not indispensable. Even pleasure comes in different flavors. For a film, I can enjoy the humorous dialogue, the occasional bared bosom, the zany dance number or the magnificent special effects of flying through space at warp speed. An old man can reread a childhood tale not to experience great literature, but to revisit memories of a simpler time when the tale first engaged him. A geek can appropriate a Picasso painting as a screensaver, and a teenager can download a Beethoven ditty onto his cell phone to impress his girlfriend. Would Beethoven approve? Or even care?

Art must entice before it can satisfy. In an age of hectic schedules, 100 TV channels, several thousand singers, hundreds of thousands of books and billions of web pages (not to mention hobbies, sports, national parks, parties, household chores and grocery shopping), is it any wonder that humans have the attention or energy for any art at all? How does art entice? And how can text-only content hope to compete with multimedia works that offer (to the male at least) the sight of beautiful female breasts? By comparison, the pleasure from reading Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen* or Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* seems quaint and inadequate.

Written storytelling offers the pleasures of intimate knowledge and the freedom of imagining situations that are unspeakable,unfilmable or hypothetical. Written storytelling endows the author with enormous power on a shoestring budget. I can conjure with words the final living moments of a man being murdered, the brutality, the terror, the fading consciousness. Words impose constraints on expression, but fewer constraints than the material constraints involved for making a film or creating an image. Written storytelling offers the imagination a guilt-free ride in another's car. We ride along without knowing where we are headed or whether the driver is safe or honest or totally insane. Once the reader hops in the car, literature becomes a harrowing, unforgettable joyride.

The dramatic arts (film, video games, theatre) *seem* to resemble literature. These genres involve stories, characters, narrative. But the dramatic arts employ people: wailing, giggling people. They fill my apartment like chatty dinner guests oblivious to their host. A novel conjures fantasies; a video stages them. I used to believe that actors were pawns for the dramatist, but lately I've come to feel that actors overshadow screenplays with their beautiful taut presences. Actors and actresses affirm the writer's or director's reality by their participation. The tension in drama lies in how actors and actresses resist a writer's dictates and turn

a literary construct into something plausible. The best actors do it by bringing their own personality (and unique emotional cadences) to the dramatic situation.

The scary (and exciting) thing about porn is that actresses involve themselves willingly in another's commercial fantasy. If a good porn performance simulates pleasure adeptly, the male viewer is aroused but bothered by questions of authenticity. If actors can fake emotions, why should we trust our everyday emotional responses? When we cry, are we merely watching ourselves cry? When we express anger, do we first think about the most effective way to convey the emotional effect? Dramas allow us to respond emotionally without the encumbrances of social convention. For once we can experience naked emotions directly (even if their instigator is nothing more than talking pixels on a screen).

In an age where extreme emotions are needed to entice an audience, the contemporary dramatist faces two choices: the cult of violence and the cult of sex. Realism and ideas don't exist natively within literature or film; they need to be interwoven with more visceral emotional experiences to survive. Tarrantino and Lynch make us experience and reexperience the nature of cruelty and conflicts. Ten years ago, the spectator might have been shocked and appalled at how the voyeur in De Palma's *Body Double* sat helplessly while the woman was tortured and killed. Watching the movie was a way of understanding the terror of helplessness. Nowadays our sensibilities have evolved to the point where sadism is just another cinematic style. This could possibly be the result of watching a film at home instead of at a theatre (where the communal context stifles subconscious desires and provides cathartic relief). Viewing a film in your living room allows the private release of forbidden emotions. Unlike the onlookers of the *Cafe Flesh* movie, who inebriate themselves in communal sublimation, spectators in the living room are alone with their emotions, both literally and metaphorically.

Sex in film provides the illusion of infinite reserves of untapped desire; violence in film provides a sense of power, revenge and justice. In the cinema of sex, a mere gaze is sufficient to unlock desire and passion; in the cinema of violence, mere determination is sufficient to ward off assaults and deliver decisive blows to wrongdoers. In real life, we are rarely able to express sexual desire or combat an antagonist so openly and directly. Expression of sexual passion and rage become the ultimate taboo; one can *feel* powerful emotions and even acknowledge their destructive power, but only if one forswears hope of exposing them to sunlight. That might not be a bad thing. After a savage video game or group sex video or sci fi thriller, a

return into the actual world of traffic signals, tampon commercials and dirty dishes will no longer seem so awful. It may even come as a relief.

Why do I opt for the cult of sex over violence? Both are equally unreal in my life. The erotic world offers a fantasy I can reside in for as long as I want; the world of violence tries to drive me out of fantasy as quickly and often as possible. The hedonism of violence repudiates the storytelling process itself, and it is that contradiction that prevents me from finding artistic value in a director's effort to imagine gore or dismemberment or death. Let me repeat: the hedonisms of violence and sex are both artificial and distorted renditions of reality. But only the hedonism of sex validates the storytelling process itself.

Do I describe the artistic choices too starkly? Can't sex and violence coexist in artistic works? And don't violent works of art have positive feedback loops? Videogames, for example, provide a recurring sense of triumph and control from attackers (even if one has to die dozens of times first). And doesn't reality scoff at artists who depict a world without warts or potty breaks or long supermarket lines?

The sex/violence dichotomy is only one of several dichotomies that organize artistic creations. Shakespeare's plays (for example) are in one sense the apotheosis of the dramatic arts. In another sense, they are excessive: bawdiness, gore, fanciful language, philosophical overreaching, dramatic improbabilities and romantic indulgence. These plays are emotionally and intellectually overwhelming, but also a study in abrasive contrasts; clashing passions and discordant moods coexist partly as a way to reflect Shakespeare's vision of a world overrun by agitation, chaos and evil.

Other works pare away extraneous detail, aiming for a single limited effect. Porn is an obvious example of what I mean, but a lot of artistic works (literary, visual and musical) strive to evoke not a world but a narrow range of experiences. These works concern themselves not with naturalism but formalism. To produce this kind of singular effect means excluding. It means that the creator has to choose whether to punctuate narratives with sex or violence, hope or cynicism, profundity or triviality. That essentially is a process of excluding.

This question of commingling sex and violence boils down to the efficacy of Shakespeare's everything-with-the-kitchen-sink approach. Which approach brings pleasure most effectively to the viewer or reader? If a two line poem brings enjoyment, can we fault it for lacking memorable characters or a compelling world vision or profound insights into morality? Why should it be anything more? Does pleasure need to be so

complex?

Pleasure should be simple, blunt and surprising.

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[1] Barth, John. "Writing: Can It Be Taught?" *New York York Times*, June 16, 1985. **https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/21/specials/barth-writing.html**

[2] Arcand, Bernard. *Jaguar and the Anteater: Pornography Degree Zero*. Translated by Wayne Grady, Verso, 1993.

Essay: Erotic Worlds of Marco Vassi

> "I've only had one criterion in my life," he told her. "Anything which can be seen as poetry is its own justification. If you view it as something ugly, then that's what it becomes. If you can sing its beauty, then that is all there is. And your soul is the soul of poetry. If you remember that, you are free to do things which would horrify the timid and the trite." (From "Yesterday's Iago" by Marco Vassi.)

- **Introduction**
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    - ***In Touch*(1975)**
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Introduction

Over the last decade the erotic fiction of Marco Vassi (1937-1989) became available as ebooks. I first came across Vassi's *The Carcass of Dreams* story cycle in the 1990s and continued reading his fiction over the years.

I have mixed feelings about Vassi's books. Some books I love without reservation. Some parts are repetitive or too transgressive; some parts are overly intellectual or have so much fucking that I have to put the book down. Sometimes these books are so full of ideas that fucking is just an afterthought. At other times they read like scripts for a highbrow pornographic movie.

The Secret Record (Michael Perkins' study of modern erotic literature)

describes Vassi as "primarily a didactic artist who asks the question, how are we to live? and answers: by eroticizing our lives." It's probably correct to think of Vassi as more of a sexual philosopher than storyteller, but his fiction shows great attention to dramaturgy and dialogue. Vassi's characters rise above the usual erotic cliches; they have nuanced psychologies, rich and peculiar aesthetics, and an ability to find beauty and transcendental joy in every kind of carnal moment. Vassi did not use sexual fantasies merely as an engine for his storytelling or philosophy; he pursued sexual adventures more vigorously in real life than even the most open-minded would try. Vassi viewed sexual explorations as not just an attempt to connect with people, but also a spiritual journey which could uncover the same kinds of eternal truths sought by religious people. His fiction contains sexist and degrading language and behavior, yet many of his female characters have complex motivations and rarely allow themselves to be treated merely as sex objects. Indeed, often Vassi himself (like many of his protagonists) switched between active and receptive roles during sexual encounters, understanding the power and appeal of both roles. He is still fondly remembered by a circle of friends who stayed with him until the end, and his recently published letters show both tenderness and hints of passion.

Three decades after Vassi's untimely death, it is worth revisiting Vassi's works and asking how relevant they are today.

Marco Vassi: Biography

I recently came across a 29 minute YouTube video titled "Let's Talk Dirty Marco Visse" where a man interviewed 44 year old Marco Vassi at Artists' Cemetery near Woodstock, New York. The interview was casual and pleasant; Vassi was a clean-cut Italian man talking affably about metasex and the erotic world. Well-mannered, unassuming and dressed in shorts and a red T-shirt, he might pass as a yoga instructor or maybe a painter – certainly no sexual revolutionary. Many details about his biography and sexual adventures seem larger than life, but it's striking that Vassi tried many of the sexual activities described in his erotica books.

Vassi grew up in a Catholic family. He attended Catholic schools and briefly entered a Franciscan monastery before enrolling at Iona College, a Catholic institution in New York. In sophomore year he dropped out to enlist in the Air Force and was selected to work in Intelligence. After being sent to San Francisco to learn Mandarin at the Institute of Far Eastern Languages, Vassi spent three years in Korea and Japan working as a radio-

intercept operator and translator. During that time he had many sexual experiences fucking himself silly (his phrase) in Japanese whorehouses. But he also had a "normal" relationship with a somewhat older Japanese woman named Hatsue who was a virgin. As Vassi later relates in *A Driving Passion* (1992), the circumstances of the seduction were somewhat unclear. Even though Vassi never felt a great amount of passion for Hatsue, he still liked her a lot and felt duty bound to propose to her. She accepted. Against the advice of friends and other people in the military, Vassi filed paperwork to get married, but it caused him to lose his security clearance and ultimately his military assignment. After being discharged, the 22 year old Vassi returned to New York (without Hatsue) to get his bachelor's degree from Brooklyn College. Vassi's parents lent him the money to bring Hatsue to New York and organized a wedding reception.

During the day Vassi took classes at Brooklyn College and worked as a file clerk at ASCAP at night. Vassi started hanging around radicals of all sorts; after a psychology instructor seduced him, Vassi started to question whether his marriage to Hatsue was genuine. Eventually he left Hatsue and moved into a commune—but not without feeling "profound guilt for having brought her from Japan" (*ADP*, 1992 p. 42). Hatsue returned to Japan (where she remarried and had children).

With Hatsue out of the picture, Vassi took classes at the New School for Social Research, learned about Gurdjieff, Ouspensky and Marx, attended yoga workshops and headed to San Francisco to hang out at the Experimental College (EC). There he led workshops, eventually playing the role of guru/teacher/performer. During one trip to Arizona to lead workshops about Zen meditation, Vassi got a girl pregnant. When he heard the news, Vassi traveled again to Arizona with friends to figure out what to do. He learned from the woman's parents that she was mentally unstable and had been in a mental hospital for six months. Vassi agreed to the marriage anyway – even participating in an orgy with her on their honeymoon. Eventually Vassi decided to leave her – learning only later that the woman had had an abortion and become addicted to drugs.

When Vassi returned to New York, he saw an ad in the *Village Voice* seeking writers for adult novels. He wrote a chapter and submitted it without success. Later he showed it to his friend Richard Curtis who was starting a career as a literary agent. Curtis encouraged him to pursue writing erotic fiction, and Vassi eventually published several novels with Olympia Press: *The Mind Blower*, *The Gentle Degenerates* and *Contours of Darkness*. Vassi found jobs writing columns for several adult magazines (*Screw*, *Gay*, *Penthouse*, *Oui*), translating things from Mandarin and serving

as a reader for various publishers.

Vassi's books were unusual for the genre of erotic fiction, but they were well written and frequently compared to the *Rosy Crucifixion* series by Henry Miller. Many of his columns for adult publications were thought pieces about sexuality, bisexuality and "metasexuality" (the title of a manifesto which will be discussed later). Vassi tried all kinds of sexual acts and with multiple partners in his personal life, then wrote freely about these experiences in both his essays and fiction. He regularly gave workshops about sex, yoga, Tantric sex, metasex, etc.

It was a daring – some might say reckless – lifestyle. It allowed Vassi to visit the extremes of human sexuality and explore the depths of pain and ecstasy. Between the late 1970s and early 1980s (when the YouTube video was shot), Vassi was in his forties, having moderated his lifestyle and started living semi-monogamously with a woman named Sara who eventually proposed to him. As John Heidenry relates it:

> The next day Sara left. "I'll always love you," she said as she boarded the bus back to New York. "But I'll probably never forgive you for rejecting me."
>
> "I'm not rejecting you," he replied forlornly. "I'm rejecting monogamy." (*What Wild Ecstasy*, p. 291.)

The woman left him and Vassi continued having dalliances, eventually meeting a woman 20 years younger than himself named Eve Diana. She lived in Boston while Marco lived in New York. Eve and Marco had a pleasant and mostly monogamous 8 month relationship that was occasionally sexual but often long distance (they exchanged letters full of longing and frustration). Eventually though, after Vassi reconnected with an old lover, it became clear that Marco and Eve wanted different things from the relationship, and so they broke up. Then, a few months later on March 22, 1987 Vassi took an AIDS test which turned out to be positive. Still in shock, he failed to notify Eve (who learned the news secondhand). Luckily, neither Eve Diana nor Annie Sprinkle (whom he had lived with briefly and been sexually involved with over the years) tested positive.

Immediately after the HIV+ diagnosis, Marco fell into a depression which (according to David Steinberg) "put him beyond the reach of even his closest friends. He wandered from east coast to west, tried to commit suicide twice, was continuously morose (despite his good physical health) and totally self-absorbed." After his first suicide attempt (on March 27, 1987), Vassi stayed in the psychiatric unit for a week and then moved to Lee

Lozowitz's spiritual community in Aptos, California from May to September of that same year. During that time Vassi also reconnected with a lover from a decade earlier (Marcy Sheiner) who provided a lot of support during Vassi's final year.

Even after the HIV diagnosis, Vassi was determined to explore safe sex alternatives while staying true to his metasexual ideals. Risk had always been an aphrodisiac to Vassi, John Heidenry commented, "*but now he had to take into account the risk to his partners. Marco and Annie decided not to have intercourse or oral sex, but to explore new ways of having sex, experimenting with tantric, Native American and Taoist techniques, forgoing Western orgasm-oriented practices in favor of rhythmic breathing, hour-long bouts of eye gazing, and conversations about how sex was really more about tapping into and circulating energy than it was about fucking and sucking.*" (*What Wild Ecstasy*, 1997, p. 390). While Marcy and Marco were together in San Francisco, they also experimented with sexual contact which would keep Marcy safe.

Vassi had to return to New York (temporarily at first, then permanently) when his father had a heart attack and both his parents turned out to be very ill. Alone and despondent, Vassi attempted suicide again in January 1988, a month before his novel *The Other Hand Clapping* was published (receiving praise from the *New York Times*). Eventually Marcy moved to New York to stay with him between April and early July 1988. Shortly after, on July 22, 1988 Annie Sprinkle threw a celebration party for Vassi. That lifted Vassi's spirits, but from that point forward both his health and spirits began to decline. In December he went out into a snowstorm practically naked, caught pneumonia and locked himself in his room for almost a month. Eventually his friend and ex-lover Andrea Ossip found him and arranged for Vassi to be admitted into a hospital and put on a ventilator (where he died two weeks later). At the memorial service, author Norman Mailer called Vassi the "foremost erotic writer in America … a sexual explorer … his own experiment, and, ipso facto, a rare mortal."

Author David Steinberg discussed Vassi's final days in a 2023 interview I did with him (web link). Steinberg once described the contradictions of Vassi's personality:

> As a person, Marco was no less contradictory than his writing. He was at times able to give another person complete and absolutely focused love and attention, while at other times being so self-absorbed and inaccessible as to be totally infuriating. He would at one moment be open to all the complexities of multipartner relationships, free of

> possessiveness, ego, and the like, and then descend in a matter of hours into simpleminded jealous tantrums hardly worthy of a TV soap opera. He was able to look the most complex, difficult truths — about sex, about relationships, about life – directly in the eye, but he was often unable to sustain even the most elementary forms of honesty and compassion with partners and friends. He was at once brilliant and idiotic, profound and trite, loving and abusive. He was the ultimate lover of irony and contradiction, the ultimate coyote trickster, and thus an accurate embodiment of the complex life force we conveniently reduce to the word "sex." He was, to me, the finest sort of complex hero: the wise man who is also a goat, the monkey who is also a monk (*This Thing We Call Sex*, 2015, pp, 99-100).

Life During the Sexual Revolution

Before looking at Vassi's fiction, one should take a moment to consider how the changing cultural and sexual mores allowed Vassi to explore his radical ideas and lifestyle.

Starting after World War 2, social forces were coming together to liberalize U.S. sexual norms. Birth control was becoming more wildly available, premarital sex and same-sex relationships were starting to become more common and accepted. So was divorce and sexual aids (and in the 1970s, abortion). Following Freud's theories about sex and psychoanalysis, Masters and Johnson started studying human sexuality and trying to understand the varieties of it. Talking about orgasms or oral sex no longer seemed taboo.

Women were demanding equal rights; dress codes and spoken language became more casual. "Free love" seems like something of a 60s cliche to contemporary readers, but college-age students were experimenting with new lifestyles in their dorms, and protesting in the streets against racism, injustice and the Vietnam War.

Magazine and book publishing had also undergone a transformation. Foreign publishers like Olympia Press were publishing lots of decadent and sexually explicit fiction – including de Sade, Genet, Bataille. Grove Press was publishing American beat poets and novelists who embraced sexual liberation and experimentation and even homosexuality. During the 1950s books by Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*,*The Dharma Bums*) and William Burroughs (*Naked Lunch*) were gaining controversy and fame while poets like Gary Snyder were exploring Eastern philosophy and Buddhism

in their works. Yes, there were controversies – prohibitions of certain books and obscenity court cases – but generally even the most extreme works could be published and purchased if you looked hard enough.

At the same time, men's magazines like *Playboy* and *Penthouse* were establishing themselves and achieving a certain notoriety. The illustrated sex manual, *The Joy of Sex*, became a mainstream bestseller in the early 1970s. Sex advice columns were popping up in both men's and women's magazines.

These were the times that Marco Vassi lived in. Despite growing up Catholic, his sexual adventures and spiritual journeys and experiments in communal living would probably not have seemed that unusual to Vassi's peers even though he probably pursued these alternative lifestyles more vigorously. Once, when asked how his fiction compared to Henry Miller's, Vassi said, "I did my writing in the throes of the sexual revolution where going to a 50 person orgy was a casual thing to do on a Thursday night.... Miller never attended sadomasochistic bisexual orgies. I did, so I got to write about that."

It's one thing to go to an orgy or have hanky-panky at a bathhouse; it's quite another thing to describe the lifestyle vividly in your writings or lead workshops about it. Compared to the libertine and transgressive things being published by Olympia Press, Vassi's writings at least had some grounding in compassion and spirituality. Maybe his philosophies weren't as systematic as that of other psychologists, but at least they were grounded firmly in humanism and love.

Erotica and Euphemism

It probably is no surprise that erotic fiction would include lots of vulgar sexual words (even though for my own erotic fiction, I use such language sparingly). But what about the language of literary criticism?

Vassi writes in complex sentences and often uses philosophical language. He often uses metaphor and elevated language to convey emotional intensity. It's clear that almost all the protagonists are highly educated and articulate. At the same time, the protagonist and other characters use sexual language all the time. Vassi's books probably use the word cunt and cock and fuck and asshole and cocksucker and whore more often than any book I have seen.

But it is more than that. Consider this passage from a different author:

> I was walking along on this fucking fine morning, fucking

> sun fucking shining away, little fucking country lane, and I meets up with this fucking girl. Fucking lovely she was, so we gets into fucking conversation and I takes her over a fucking gate into a fucking field and we has sexual intercourse. (*The Anatomy of Swearing*, U. of Penn. Press, 1967 pp. 314-315.)

In this context, the word "fucking" has nothing to do with sex or anatomy. It has to do with cursing or yelling or emotional emphasis. Even in the bedroom using vulgar words sometimes can be a deliberate choice to highlight the thrilling sense of taboo or suggest strong emotions. By contrast, in Vassi's fiction, these words are used by the narrator simply for their functionality. I can't think of a single instance where the narrator uses a sexual euphemism (except in an ironic, self-mocking way). Vassi could certainly write compelling sex scenes with restrained language and sexual euphemism (and he does that somewhat in *The Other Hand Clapping*).

When privately contemplating sexual acts and fantasies, you can use any language you want. But when you write, you choose language for a variety of reasons: succinctness, expressiveness, comprehensibility, readability. Time and time again Vassi opts for raw language not so much for shock value but because it is the simplest and most direct way to express things. The words "cock" and "cunt" are easy to say and pair together; the language is reductionist and totally objectifying. Except in cases when the words are used playfully or to emphasize physical positions or sexual acts, they rarely are used to express anger or contempt.

This may simply reflect the casual language of the 1960s and 1970s or the fact that such language prevailed in the commune or that Vassi didn't spend much time in professional settings where profanity was discouraged. There's an amazing scene at the end of the "Dying Gynecologist" where the protagonist is fading out of consciousness while his soul goes wandering into the cosmic afterlife:

> As the darkness of his death deepened, the memories fade, and the immense cunt before his mind's eye began to tremble, and open. From its roseate serrated center another cunt emerged, and another from the center of that. Cunt after cunt opened from the cunt preceding it. It was an infinite progression, never fully reaching him, continually spilling forth. He strained forward, to be taken into the heart of the budding cunt machine. It was the baby attempting to return, it was the

man diving into the mystery, it was both and wall.

As he reached up in revery, the body on the bed bent at the middle and sat bolt upright. The people in the room were shocked at what they thought was a corpse perform such a sharp strenuous act. His lids flew up, but he saw nothing. His lips moved. A single word leapt from his throat.

"Cunt," he said.

The frequent use of such language in Vassi's fiction is designed to stress our sexual natures and also the importance of acknowledging that fact. Otherwise, we are acting like hypocrites and perhaps even alienating ourselves from our physical and sensual side. Love and romance certainly have spiritual qualities and the textual aspects of prose can make everything seem more abstract. Vassi's use of such language calls attention to the sexual potential in gender designations regardless of how old or young people are.

When writing an essay about Vassi's fiction, I am tempted to sanitize the language in my descriptions except when giving direct quotes. But what would be the point?

About Metasex

Vassi wrote an essay, the "Metasexual Manifesto," which encapsulates both his philosophical approach and aesthetics.

He divided the erotic world (eroticum) into two forms: **sex** (which is mainly procreative in purpose) and **metasex** (which is more about expressing affection and reaching for pleasure).

Sex is more serious, reverent and responsible. Metasex is for pleasure, for expressing affection, for exchanging energy, for money, for communication and exploitation, for meditation, etc. It might be labeled "play eroticum." As Vassi writes:

> The basic error in all erotic thinking lies in muddying the aesthetics of metasex with the moral contingencies of sex, and of subverting the mystery and grandeur of sex with the relativistic values of metasex ... There is no real difference between what two men do in bed, from what three women might do in bed, nor from what a man and a woman do in bed. To label the action homosexual or bisexual or heterosexual is divisive, alienating us from one another as human beings first and foremost.

Vassi defines different modes of sex and metasex which can differ in motives, goals and presentation.

The **Procreative Mode** is sex for the purpose of having a baby. It has a serious and urgent quality. There is a "quality of silence which has nothing to do with whether the participants make sounds or not. There is an almost holy intimacy which is unmistakable." For Vassi, even two men having anal sex can experience the "vibrations" of the procreative mode, as a kind of mythic structure deep within us.

The **Theatrical Mode** involves a performance and distance between performers and onlookers. It requires a lightness of touch and a sense of the visual. Also, this mode requires maintaining the performance as an *act*, as a performance which audiences can understand and enjoy, aware that participants are playing roles only temporarily. The acting out of fantasy requires that the participants be able to tell the difference between using and *abusing* one another. This could involve scripts or regular routines or stylized motions. Alternatively, it may simply be a private performance between two people aware of what roles they play in the performance, and the archetypes and costumes they assume for these roles.

The **Therapeutic Mode** involves using sex to liberate repressed feelings to help the partner express these feelings more easily. Vassi said that this mode provides a "potent mythic structure within which to pursue greater self-knowledge" and allows the individual tap into deep emotions while in an almost childlike state.

The **Romantic Mode** taps into the joyous feeling of love and admiration where "'I want to be with you forever' comes easily to the lips." Language plays an important part of this mode, allowing one to wax poetic directly to a loved one. Yet Vassi warns about the issue of truthfulness. If such feelings are genuine and spontaneous, then the Romantic mode can provide a lifetime of ecstasy. But as emotional intensity wanes and expressions of devotion become so exaggerated as to become ridiculous, one must be careful not to extend it for too long. If that happens, joy starts to become hollow.

The **Masturbatory Mode** is no less valid than the other modes of sexuality. It can even seem more intense; it does not have to be limited to one person by himself or herself. It can involve partners or even several people simultaneously. Vassi called this mutual masturbation a "subtle and delicate game ... requiring sensitivity to the inner works of the other(s)." The masturbatory mode can even favor the tendency to celibacy and might be viewed as a way for the individual to keep the erotic energies flowing within oneself.

The **Zen Mode** is "produced through transmodality" and reflects our ability to shift between modes and operate in several modes simultaneously, collapsing them all together. Vassi does not get more specific than that, but suggests that shaking up the erotic modes can reveal "the moment's utter reality" and expose "all the joy and terror of coming face to face with The Nakedness."

The Metasex essay ends by discussing how procreative sex brings an "ecological consciousness" and an "awareness of the nature of life in general and of humanity in particular." At some point, Vassi consciously tried to conceive a child with a lover named Lucinda (the same name as the pregnant woman in the *Saline Solution* novel). It made him confront certain things:

> At once, not only the species, but we as individuals, were on trial, and on all counts from the personal to the geopolitical. For example, we both smoke, and we are guilty about being enslaved by a self-destructive habit. Now the question: will the nicotine we ingest into our blood streams infect the child? And more subtly: shall the child have parents who are still prey to debilitating habits. …
>
> And what of the fact that almost any school I send the child to will be a factory run by mindless conformists, processing human beings on a conveyor belt of pseudo-knowledge the way automobile parts are run through on an assembly line? What of the fact that we live in a world where only a few know even of liberty, much less freedom? And what of the realities of monstrous warfare, and unwholesome food, and foul water, and filthy air? The human species is making a concerted effort to prove conclusively that it is the lowest form of life on earth, and into such a situation, what is the purpose of bringing a child?

Vassi wrote a lot more essays – many for magazines and some which were included in the *Erotic Comedies* volume. Many were for the consumption of readers of adult magazines. They were almost all about sex and metasex, homosexuality and bisexuality, communes, S&M, anal sex, fetishes, Tantric sex, that sort of thing. All very provocative, somewhat exhibitionist, talking about various lovers and sexual encounters. Many of Vassi's anecdotes in these essays were attempts to illustrate the ethical and psychological insights he had gained from his free-loving sex-positive lifestyle. They also show how he worked through ethical doubts and found

solace and joy from that lifestyle.

Vassi had already given lots of self-help workshops and was comfortable playing the part of guru. I think one important aim of Vassi's essays – and probably his fiction – is to champion the metasexual lifestyle but also to show how a person like himself can adopt the lifestyle while still abiding by a personal moral standard and not be ravaged by self-doubts or guilt.

Psychology has moved well past the psychological frameworks of Freud or Wilhelm Reich that Vassi used as his philosophical foundation. Over the past 40 or 50 years, academic departments have emerged to study queer theory, gender/transgender studies and both the physiological and psychological dimensions of human sexuality. Counselors, therapists and support groups have sprung up to help couples to navigate through sexual issues – to say nothing of better sex aids, more informed laws to crack down on sexual abuse and evolving language ("sex worker" instead of "prostitute," etc.) Vassi had witnessed the variety of ways sexual desire could manifest itself and had flirted with the most taboo of behaviors, but his ideas reflected that of only one person during one era.

Still, Vassi's fiction indicates an intuitive understanding of the dynamics of the gay, polyamorous and S&M lifestyles. They also incorporate many Eastern concepts in the words and actions of characters. At the same time, Vassi's metasexual ideas did not present a comprehensive system of understanding sex and society. It made assumptions about people's personal freedoms and emotional independence. For instance, metasex never was intended to address exploitation or rape as social problems; it didn't address marital fidelity or how children develop a sexual identity over time. Vassi died at the age of 51. There was no opportunity for him to explore how people's approaches to sex and identity change over a lifetime; it was his devotion to metasex that led to his death, but really, who in the 1980s knew that AIDS would be so terrifyingly fatal? One can hardly fault Vassi for being ignorant of the risks inherent in his polyamorous lifestyle – especially when at the time no one – not even the scientists – fully understood these risks.

Talking about Vassi's Fiction

Vassi worked primarily in the genre of erotic fiction. He got started in 1970 when he saw an ad in the *Village Voice* seeking "writers for adult novels." After he sent in a chapter to the publisher, the response he received ("it's too literary for the fuck market and it's got too much fucking

in it for the literary market") typified the dilemma Vassi faced. How do you accommodate both kinds of readers?

Vassi finished a novel (*Mind Blower*) which was published by Olympia Press and followed that with several other erotic novels. As adept as Vassi was at writing sex scenes (in terms of mechanics, sensory evocations and psychological insights), the number and duration of the sex scenes in these novels might seem excessive. Vassi might have been aware that these literary-sexual fantasies were too cerebral for the average reader of this genre and made up for it by throwing in extra amounts of sex.

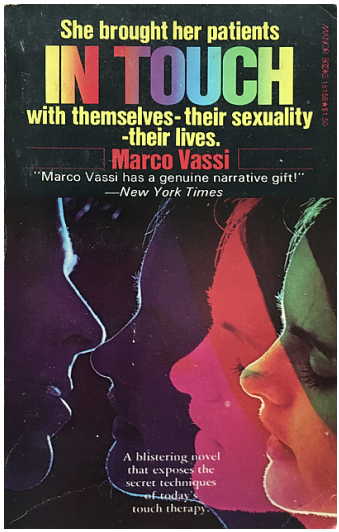
The question of how long or detailed to make sex scenes is a constant issue with erotic fiction; how do you keep the reader interested and excited? How do you persuade the reader to care about the characters? If you have written a threesome scene, would adding two or three people or extra orgasms make the scene more erotic? Sometimes more and longer sex is better for readers; sometimes less is more. A novel offers additional challenges. Wall-to-wall sex might work in short fiction, but a novel needs suspense, a variety of incidents and believable characters. The reader needs a reason to stay with a protagonist for 200 pages. (That's hard to accomplish in any novel – erotic or not).

All fiction has an element of artifice, and erotic fiction can sometimes drown the reader in fantasy. In his essay "Marco Vassi: Avatar of Eros", David Steinberg notes that

> Almost every bit of Marco's writing has a twist, a jab, a way of saying that things are not what they seem, not what we like to pretend they are. He is, in this sense, a true Sadean in that he wants to expose the artifice, the unreality, the hypocrisy so prevalent in how people act and talk about sex. (*This Thing We Call Sex*, pp, 97-101).

For simplicity's sake, this essay will examine four Vassi works. *In Touch* is enjoyable both as a light-hearted story and a social satire. *Erotic Comedies* contains a brilliant and imaginative series of erotic portraits. The early novel *Saline Solution* is a real mess, but it also was a compelling drama with genuine social issues. *Other Hand Clapping* is the undisputed masterpiece, although ironically it has the least fucking of all. These four struck me as good starting points for entering Vassi's beautiful and inconsolable worlds.

In Touch: The Cosmic Joke



"Illusion ... reality ... it all depends on the point of view, doesn't it?" he said. "But whose point of view, that's the question." (Ch. 1)

Erotic fiction – if it becomes too serious or tragic, can lose its magic. It can also become arduous to read.

Conversely, sex scenes which are too silly or far-fetched can be just as tiresome. If characters jump into bed too quickly or demonstrate superhuman agility or stamina, the reader may feel cheated. Satire offers small doses of realism; its characters don't need psychological depth, but they may still take things seriously and have recognizable (though slightly absurd) motivations. Satire can lack a tragic dimension even if there is death and downfall. In a satirical novel, you can slap a character in the face and not have to worry he will be scarred for life.

One Touch (1975) is a kind of cosmic joke. It opens with a beautiful young woman named Marsha who has snuck onto the rooftop of a New York skyscraper and started dancing nude while police officers and emergency crews ponder what to do. Was she suicidal? Delusional? Harmless? A young doctor at the scene begs the nude woman not to jump while "fighting the stirring of an erection from the moment he laid eyes on the woman." Eventually her therapist Lydia Stone, PhD. is found. Lydia shows up at the scene with her boyfriend (a wisecracking screenwriter named Fred Fenwick) and tries to engage with Marsha in order to keep her from

jumping. But it becomes clear to Lydia that "she knew no way to do that except by convincing the other woman that her current reality – dancing naked at the edge of the tallest building in New York City – was merely a fantasy and should be put aside. But for what? What was Lydia offering as an alternative?"

Lydia keeps trying to coax Marsha to safety, but instead Marsha just dives off the ledge to her death, to the shock and dismay of onlookers.

As Lydia tries to sort through what has just happened, she goes home and has sex with Fred. At the start, Lydia fucks her partner

> in total silence, and from time to time she actually dozed off, soaring into delicious dreams of flying, and then descending to consciousness, only to find that the man above her was still invading the deepest recesses of her body with insidious sensuous awareness." (Ch. 2)

The next day Lydia sees another patient, Nora, a 36 year old housewife with difficulty having orgasms. In previous visits Lydia had concluded that there was nothing wrong with this patient, but her usual counseling so far hadn't brought any breakthroughs. Her boyfriend Fred suggests a simple remedy:

> "... take a housewife, give her a valium and a glass of Scotch, and plunk her down in an easy chair in front of the tube, and then feed the collective fantasies of the nation directly into her subconscious. It's cheaper, easier and free of all the rigmarole you indulge in. Soap operas are much more honest than therapy, because they don't pretend that each individual's tacky little melodrama has any more value than being merely an idiosyncratic manifestation of the national mentality at any given time. The soap opera provides precisely what your therapy does: catharsis." (Ch. 2)

Instead Lydia, following the advice of her mentor Dr. Monroe, urges Nora to try masturbation. She walks Nora through some fantasizing exercises, but to Lydia's surprise, Nora takes things too far, disrobing and masturbating to orgasm in Lydia's presence. Lydia recognizes that by allowing this to happen, she has crossed a boundary that therapists do not typically cross; she has allowed herself to become a participant in her patient's sexual explorations and self-discovery.

For the rest of the novel Lydia learns to accept her new role. Instead of

trying to avoid having patients transfer their feelings and affectionate desire onto her, Lydia welcomes it – and even invites it. She visits her mentor and control therapist to explain her ethical dilemma; despite his initial disapproval, eventually Dr. Monroe is seduced by Lydia's new approach to therapy – both figuratively and literally.

Gradually Lydia shifts from being a therapist to that of facilitator and guide for groups of people seeking to open their minds and hearts (and bodies) to new experiences. As Lydia opens herself more fully to the emotional needs of patients, she finds that she has gained a new kind of curative power. Her presence becomes sought after, to the point where it transforms her regular social life (not to mention her relationship with her cynical boyfriend). Soon she is using her visualization exercises and sensual explorations to help groups of people all at once.

Along the way there are ample opportunities for sex and complications coming from various groups who disapprove of Lydia's new mission.

The novel is offering a critique of the therapy profession. But there is another struggle: how does the fantasizing process let you cope with the ugliness of the world? Earlier, right after the patient's suicide, as Lydia goes to a party with her boyfriend, she looks at the city:

> … She hadn't realized how far she had been carried down the stream of dissolution until she tried to measure her present state with what she'd previously considered to be normality. Now, the entire edifice of her civilization appeared as a monstrous block against the flow of life. The movement inside the dance parlor had been liquid, warm, sinuous. Out here she could see the crystallized anti-life tendencies of the ordinary world. Square houses lined perpendicular streets. People moved with an unconscious self- consciousness. The cars rolled past like deformed beetles, ugly and noxious, great wasteful carriers emitting poison gas. It was as though humanity were a single lovely body and civilization a straitjacket choking it slowly to death, a constraint constructed of time-clocks and rules which served the abstractions of finance rather than the eternal and infinite pulse of life itself. This was the reality, she suddenly saw, that she had been attempting to get her patients to adjust to. This was the reality which she had taken as a measure of health. (Ch. 3)

For Lydia the real challenge is not teaching patients to change their

perspective on the world but to change the world itself. She does this by creating a safe place where a circle of friends can come together and re-imagine the world and its assumptions. Her boyfriend Fred is initially supportive, but expresses skepticism. "Fantasy is the way to beat the reality game," Fred says, "but you're perverting that. You're trying to infuse fantasy into reality to change what is. And that's a form of pride, as well as a futile exercise."

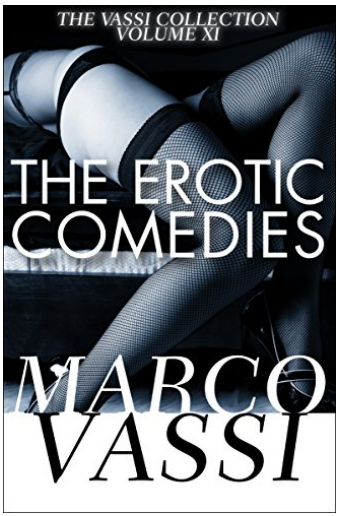
In fact, Fred is jealous of Lydia's devotion to her new group and her willingness to direct the attentions and affections of her followers. Indeed, Lydia admits that the group is helping her as much as she is helping them. How does Lydia explain herself to Fred?

> Lydia told him, "I do love you. But that means something far different to me than it once did. Love for me used to mean tension, the struggle between my autonomy and the man's will. Now it means sharing, the ability to enter a common space together. I have a purpose now. I don't exist as a reflection or an extension of a man. I'm my own woman. And I have my own destiny and vision to fulfill." (Ch. 7)

Lydia moves with her group to New Mexico and even invites Fred to join her commune, but Fred is convinced that her group is nothing but a bunch of misfits who are taking advantage of Lydia's emotional generosity. Fred, she has concluded, simply cannot understand her journey.

The novel ends on a surprising note which I will not reveal, but it is attempting to reconcile two irreconcilable viewpoints as embodied by Lydia and Fred. I really enjoyed inhabiting this fictional world not only for the sensual delights and evocative descriptions, but also the struggle with ideas. Yes, this novel had a lot of fucking (tons of it) but that is almost beside the point. Let us appreciate the difficulty in trying to merge the erotic with the philosophical in the same novel. Milan Kundera was one author who could do this artfully and lyrically. Kundera accomplished this by using a polyphonic structure with short chapters of varying length and moods. But as radical as Vassi's novels are in style and theme, *In Touch* has a conventional novel structure and (with one exception) a consistent point of view and no flashbacks. As Lydia makes her decisions, the reader can see her struggles and self-doubts. The erotic embraces of the novel flow naturally and never seem forced. The conversations are cerebral but seem so natural and spontaneous that it never weighs down the prose. *In Touch* is a rich and complex tale masquerading as minor satire.

The Carcass of Dreams: Erotic Fairy Tales



The Carcass of Dreams (a story cycle found in *Metasex, Mirth and Madness: Erotic Tales of the Absurdly Real* – and later renamed as *Erotic Comedies*) is the most likely to gross out and offend the greatest number of people; it depicts all kinds of fetishistic behavior. These stories can be entertaining, beautiful and poetic. They are as simple as fairy tales or fables; characters may not be fully developed, but their motives and impulses and sexual curiosities are recognizable. Taken together, the collection tries to imagine the full variety of sexual experiences from the degrading to the sublime.

These perverse sketches are to be taken more metaphorically than literally. Characters have bizarre desires or sexual arrangements, but they pay no attention to social rules or conventional morality. Nobody would call these characters deep or particularly complex; their fetishes or secret desires exhilarate and oppress them. Reading these stories is like a tourist visiting indigenous villages with unfamiliar customs; all these alternate modes of living seem exotic or hilarious or even a little sexy, but it is hard (or even impossible) for an outsider to embrace them fully and sincerely. That is just not the point. These perverse sketches challenge the reader's notion of sexual normalcy and raise the question of how future generations might regard whatever counts as "normal" today.

Several stories are about people with workaday dreams and sexual hangups. "The Dying Gynecologist" shows how a male doctor's lifelong

obsession – both professional and personal – with the female anatomy has transformed his *Weltanschauung* and even his dreams. "The Sicilian's Revenge" is a monologue of a narcissistic Wall Street executive proclaiming his own business genius to a prostitute sucking his cock. Ordinarily this woman might be pitied for sullenly doing her job until it becomes clear that the woman is simultaneously indulging her own power fantasies and that both individuals are feeding one another's fantasies while never really gaining anything. In "Yesterday's Iago," a married man named Albert offers emotional support to Margaret, a Platonic friend in an abusive marriage. Then Margaret leaves her abusive husband and has a series of sexual flings while sharing the graphic details with Albert. As the flings become more unrestrained and even abusive, Albert is torn between continuing to offer support as a friend and showing anger at Margaret for taking him for granted and expressing his repressed lust for her. It's an unsettling story that leaves unclear the motivations of both people until the end. Another story, "Subway Dick" is about a man who inconspicuously rubs his body against a pretty woman on the subway and then has to decide whether the woman is reciprocating his sexual interest or he is only imagining it. "No Woman of Man Born" is about a transsexual who has completed surgery to become female. She feels liberated to explore her sexual desire for men, but finds that the kinds of people now attracted to her has completely changed as a result.

A few stories imagine fetishes and taboo acts. They are reminiscent of Poe's horror tales, exposing readers to the sadistic irrationalities of the human soul. A story about sexual fetishes might force you to imagine the unimaginable and haunt your dreams for a while or inspire perverse imaginings. On the other hand, tens of thousands read Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" in high school literature classes each year without ever triggering a spike in murders by immurement.

Most of Vassi's stories are merely suggestive and satirical. All have a spiritual quality and portray people dealing with sexual desires in the only way they know how. Even the fetishist in "Bluebeard's Instant Grecian Urn" who beheads women in order to preserve their "orgasm face" seems not particularly cruel or heartless; he seems unaware of the magnitude of the crimes he has been committing; he is just a fetish collector who knows no other way to capture the orgasmic beauty that is his lifelong obsession. He is depicted as a tragic figure killed by his own obsessions. Readers should condemn these crimes – it is savage murder! At the same time, the story portrays him as striving towards an unattainable ideal; he might as well have been an obsessed fan cutting up pictures of women he adored or

compiling a series of favorite porn clips. The character's actions are wrong and pathetic, but the story offers the reader a way to better understand his motives for pursuing this solitary fetish without needing to offer sympathy.

Probably the most taboo stories are about shit-eating ("Organic Coprophiliac"), fist-fucking and masochism ("Fist Fucker") and enema play ("Bowel Boogie"). The "Organic Coprophiliac" takes a satirical look at the generation gap and a parent's attempt to educate a teenage child about crazy sexual acts. Such a conversation is going to be cringey and uncomfortable regardless of what kind of bedroom behavior is being discussed. "Bowel Boogie" imagines a clinic that forces its female clients to take enemas – presumably for the satisfaction of the perverted male doctor. But what if the doctor's promises of spiritual serenity gained from enema treatments turn out to be accurate? "Fist Fucker" tells the story of a boy sexually abused from an early age but who continues to allow himself to be used sexually by men as he grows older. Ironically, despite the cruelty and the sexual exploitation done to the helpless boy, the style and tone is sympathetic and modest, comparing the profane sacrifices of the young man to Christ's crucifixion.

Some stories ponder sexual peccadilloes from the standpoint of the unspoiled or innocent. "Land of the Sperm King" tells about an indigenous people in a remote area whose leader gains sustenance only by drinking sperm from all the men. Elaborate community rituals facilitate the collection of this semen, but when people from the outside world come to visit and condemn these sperm rituals, the village has to decide whether to give up these practices or reject all the benefits of modern civilization.

In another bizarre offering ("Circus of Jade") a libertine lesbian named Butch Medusa grows tired of organizing lavish lesbian orgies ("This orgy has no socially redeeming value" she declares) and mixes things up by recruiting a bunch of gay cocks to assimilate into her orgiastic projects. After traveling far and wide to find fags with exactly the right temperament, the giant orgy becomes a kind of "sexual cyclotron" that unleashes enough raw sexual energy to bring the world into a "euphoric cloud" for weeks. It's a far-flung fantasy bordering on magic. The orgy begins to resemble

> a jellyfish pulsating at the edges … and at the brain of the superorganism was Butch Medusa, coursing all the vibrations through herself.… (A) power emerged that was greater than the ability of any single person to claim. It began to take over by

itself, reducing the men and women to units in a conglomerate.

In the final story "Kingdom of Come," a promiscuous woman retreats to her apartment to indulge her elaborate masturbatory sexual fantasies in private. Then she is visited by a green-skinned intergalactic deity who is impressed by how she has "hacked a hard-won path through all the tedious variations on the public sex act" and who offers to fuck her to help her "see into the heart of the void from which all existence springs."

Although the story ends as ludicrous supernatural fantasy, it begins as solitary philosophical investigation. The slut-philosopher protagonist reflects on her years of sexual promiscuity and wonders "why she was expending so much energy on what had suddenly come to seem a senseless melodrama." At first glance it might appear that the woman is seeking to atone for her profligate adventures. No, she is merely expressing her desire to separate her unquenchable sexual desire from her dependency on other people for sexual relief. She realizes "the only real question that has any validity in the erotic realm: *why involve others at all*?"

The slut-philosopher engages in a series of questions about her behavior and motivation. Finding joy in masturbation liberates her from the expectations of others and allows her to see who she is and what she really wants. Eventually she walls herself from society and "los(es) her conventional good looks and became sublime, the way a snarled tree ravaged by wind and salt air grows terrible in its aspect on cliff overhanging the ocean."

This woman's spiritual-erotic journey is an engrossing, entertaining fantasy; and really, meeting an intergalactic deity is probably the only suitable way to resolve a plot that has solipsistically removed the rest of the human race from the picture. In real life, this woman would quickly run out of money, food and suitable entertainment options before crawling back to human society. Does graduating from copulation to masturbation provide a path that is more spiritually rewarding? I suspect that the modern day equivalent of this character would be content to spend the rest of her erotic life in a virtual world or even a world of her own imagining. Vassi is not condemning this withdrawal – just exploring its limits. In the story, the slut-philosopher attains a kind of salvation through immortality (at least that is what the deity has promised). But it's more plausible to imagine that this woman pursues these erotic dreams for a while but eventually returns to the mundane world of day jobs, housework, electric bills, and family get-togethers. One myopic thing about this story's perspective is to think that erotic fantasies or rituals permeate a person's

consciousness 100% of the time. No matter how tantalizing the prospect of a fully realized erotic life might seem to be, it's hard to imagine that a person in real life would find it to be sufficient – more like a beautiful and exciting experience which if repeated too often would become tedious.

The Saline Solution: Potential Parenthood

The Saline Solution (1972) is a lurid mess of a novel, yet its heartlessness can sear the soul.

It reminded me of Jean Paul Sartre's *Age of Reason*, a novel I read at college and admired without really enjoying. Like Sartre's novel, *The Saline Solution* features an anti-hero wandering aimlessly through life, seeing the falsity of things and engaging in careless and almost self-destructive behavior.

The novel's first lines present the situation:

> We didn't know whether we wanted the baby, so we drifted until Lucinda passed the third month of pregnancy. And then it became a question of murder.

The novel was published in 1972, one year before the US Supreme Court protected the right to abortion across the country. In fact, abortion was legalized in New York in 1970, two years before the novel came out.

It seems apparent from the start that the protagonist does not have the right temperament to be father. He was cynical about life and not particularly invested in his current relationship with Lucinda (a divorcee who was already raising two daughters). Sure, he liked Lucinda and liked fucking her. On the surface at least he doesn't seem particularly bothered by his predicament. He is somewhat opposed to the idea of having children – but not absolutely so. He is self-aware enough to know that he would not be a good parent. But he is angered at the notion that it threatens his freedom. Is that what causes people to surrender their freedoms and live boring conventional lives – a stupid biological mistake?

As time goes on, he can't help but ponder the implications. "The only true revolutionary is the one who affects a life style which takes the imminent destruction of the entire species as a basic premise." Expanding further, he thinks:

> The child was a mockery of our purpose. But its existence raises a serious question. If it were my life against its, I would not have hesitated for a second to despatch it. But it was my life style against its life. Was how I lived more important than that it lived? Did it point to some essential defect within my person that I could not allow this infant to come into the world and maintain myself as well? (Ch. 4)

This is a self-centered perspective, and frankly it ignores the needs of the would-be mother. But what is his lifestyle like anyway? He hangs around friends, has sexual dalliances and feels a degree of anger at society and the political situation. But mostly he is devoted to sensual pleasures and the company of woman. In one scene, the narrator goes off on a rant about how "culture is sick at its core… So distorted that there is no way to even remember what a healthy human being is like." ("'And what about the baby?' Lucinda replies with tears in her eyes.") After receiving little interest or cooperation from the narrator, Lucinda announces that she will schedule the appointment with the abortionist. The narrator wonders to himself:

> Am I a criminal if I refuse to assume the role which is necessary to give Lucinda the support she needs to have the baby? Not in any judicial sense, but existentially. If I knowingly commit the act, or omit the act, which leads to having the baby flushed out of her womb, I have ended the life of another being…

> And if I follow that path, doesn't a new door open for me in the corridors of action? For if I kill my own child, why should I hesitate at obliterating any of the monsters who strangle freedom in the name of authority?..."
>
> ... I was at a point where I could find no reference point for value, and was fast slipping into the stream of my own nameless becoming. From time to time I would leap like a salmon into the turbulent air and flash on the delineation of my condition, and I find that I had transmogrified into a revolutionary, or a homosexual, or a junkie, or a heretic, or any one of the thousand things my civilization said I should not be." (Ch. 5)

Later the narrator calls himself a "clever killer ape – while the liberal in me was horrified at the spectacular atrocities committed by the military, the observer in me pointed out that not a day went by in which I didn't kill with a thought or a gesture." This is a nuanced and sophisticated rant; it was practically a rationalization for nihilism. On the other hand, he was sexually adventurous before the pregnancy; there is no reason to think that having a baby will change that.

It may be disconcerting to read these cogitations in a novel that is mostly about sexual experimentation and flirting with the bisexual lifestyle. Right after this scene, there was an entire chapter devoted to a passionate affair with a Jewish girl, a graphic description of a time they invited another man into the bedroom and her parents' misguided attempt to break them up. Following that is a chapter where he spends a casual evening with his best friend Francis and her girlfriend Donna, getting high on mescaline, walking around the park and then fooling around a little with Donna. That is followed by a chapter about cruising in a wooded area and engaging in a "time-hallowed rite of cocksucking" with five other men.

Clearly the novel is not just about childbirth or monogamy or even heterosexuality vs. homosexuality. It's a character study of the thoughts and attitudes of a hypersexual man trying to understand his values and moral limits. While awaiting Lucinda's return from the city, the protagonist rides his bicycle around the island in a "state of phenomenological flux – and giddy with the open potential of the moment," so he pays a nighttime visit to another female named Carol. Carol lives with a three year old son, a painter and her mother. The giddy protagonist greets Carol who is watching television in a skimpy outfit. His desire for Carol increases as she tells him to "please just go."

The protagonist orders Carol to undress and threatens to rape her. After

she struggles, he drops his pants and forces himself on her. But it is not clear whether this is really a rape or some playacting thing they are doing. The protagonist thinks, "There was nothing to do now but fuck her. But my excitement at the moment was other than sexual. I needed her to struggle, or show signs of revulsion. How could there be a rape without a contest?"

As he is beginning to fuck Carol, he notices that Carol is still watching the movie on the TV. It's a movie about a man trying to escape from the Nazis. The man in the movie is going through a trapdoor and looking at the face of a young woman in tears.

> "The girl's a nun," Carol said. "She's helping him escape from the Germans." …
>
> "The rape," I hissed. "Let's get on with the rape." …
>
> "You don't want me," Carol said, "you want my cunt. Why are you wasting my time with me?"

It's a strange sex scene, splicing parts from the TV movie into it – the hero tries to kiss the pretty nun who pulls back, then Nazi soldiers burst through the door, grabbing and twisting the nun's arm and threatening to torture her. During the TV movie the narrator starts getting rough with Carol while she urges him to "Fuck me good … I haven't been fucked good in a really long time."

By that point it was clear that this was no rape but playacting (Carol later offers him coffee and asks him to spend the night). There is a similar kind of encounter in later chapters, and while the protagonist relishes the dangerous way to appease his lust, his mind occasionally returns to the fetus in Lucinda's womb. Speaking about his latest conquest, he asks:

> What difference whether I fucked her or not, hurt her or not? When you've destroyed one human being, you've destroyed us all. And it is possible to acquire a taste for the process, growing more subtle, able to play hide and seek with one's motivations, pretending to oneself that one is in love again, or simply seeking sex again, while the unrelenting hidden purpose is murder. (Ch. 13)

Lucinda pops into various scenes and indeed, they talk in vulgar ways about their sexual histories, but ultimately no decision is made about the pregnancy. For all practical purposes, this novel is just a countdown to the inevitable abortion. He spends more time with Lucinda, continuing to fuck her and engage in wild sexual fantasies while keenly aware that he is

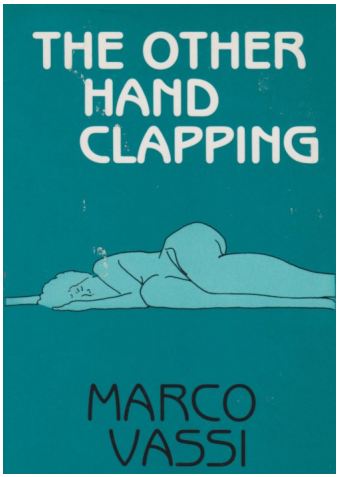
becoming inured to the moral shock of having rejected the baby. In the final chapter, Lucinda has completed the abortion procedure, and they have returned home. They are talking about movies, eating ice cream, taking care of the cable TV connection, relaxing. Here's the novel's final paragraph:

> I pissed into the urinal, thinking about what I would do next. It was impossible to stay, and there was no place to go. I flushed the tank with a deliberate twist of the wrist, and watched the yellow water swirl into the base of the bowl on its way to the pipes, into the bowels of the building, under the city street, into the river, and to the wounded and vengeful ocean beyond.

This *Saline Solution* is unsettling, to put it mildly. The dialogue and the characters are interesting, and so are the sex scenes and ruminations. Vassi is a thinker after all. By the end the protagonist seems to have accepted who he is and that an abortion is an inevitable consequence of his freewheeling lifestyle. But it's unclear whether his attitude towards Lucinda will change or if their relationship is doomed to disintegrate.

It's true that Lucinda is treated badly by the narrator through the novel. But when the male characters are not fucking them tirelessly, female characters in Vassi's novels are colorful, sympathetic and certainly not acquiescent to male desire (at least not all the time). Yet the novel feels shapeless. It is full of extraneous stuff. The scenes go on and on. The protagonist is not a good person even if he is honest with himself. All the dilly-dallying about the pregnancy question only prolongs the agony for them both. But they are still young, and in 1972 abortion was still a freedom that very few people appreciated or understood. The *Saline Solution* has a lot of incidents (and tons of sex), but little direction.

The Other Hand Clapping: Zen and Marriage



The Other Hand Clapping was published in 1987, months after Vassi tested positive for HIV. In many ways it is Vassi's most conventional novel – a psychological portrait of a married couple in crisis. Not sexually explicit in the least, it still simmers with sexual tension. It is contemplative but still has drama and twists.

Larry and Eleanor are both educated and creative people who have been married for six years. Their careers and personal goals have been pulling them in opposite directions. Larry is a bookstore owner trying to perfect Zen meditation, and Eleanor is an accomplished actress who hadn't yet achieved significant success. Larry's focus on meditation has also taken the passion out of marriage; lovemaking is less assertive, more Tantric, even less intimate. Eleanor signs up for an acting workshop with a provocative teacher near Woodstock and suggests to her husband that they rent a house there for the summer. That summer retreat is the ultimate realization of a dream – uninterrupted time and space for individual pursuits. It provides space to ponder their respective futures: should Eleanor wind down her acting career and have a baby? Does Larry have enough discipline to master the intricacies of Zen meditation and remain a good husband? They even decide to avoid sex for a few months to minimize distraction and hopefully reveal where they want this marriage to go (or as Eleanor says, to "see if we still have a marriage we want to save.")

For the couple it's an interesting challenge and opportunity. For a storyteller, it's also a great premise. It allows the novel to focus on the

mundane aspects of this couple's life and odd minor details which ordinarily wouldn't merit attention (either in a novel or real life). For much of the novel, Eleanor is away at her acting workshop, leaving Larry to stew in his jealousy and feelings of irritation. He was supposed to be meditating! Up to that point Larry's Zen training had made him hyperaware of external surroundings as well as his breathing and posture. Now though, he is constantly distracted by his wife regardless of whether she's at home or in class. Larry can't get her out of her mind; could it be true that "a woman is an impediment to man's realization"? Small things about her behavior catch his eye. Eleanor was acting edgy, or was it just his imagination? In the bathroom he noticed that a pair of Eleanor's undergarments was torn. But why? He imagined Eleanor being taken by another man – an actor at the same workshop? – but then dismissed it as *mayko* (a Zen term for hallucinations when people meditate too long).

Larry notices that Eleanor was no longer wearing a locket he gave her during their honeymoon. Eleanor becomes alarmed until she remembers that she had removed it during a class exercise which everyone had to do in the nude. She assures Larry that she knows the exact spot where she left it. But Larry is still fuming about the "acting exercise" that permitted her classmates to see her nude. He realizes that he is tasting "anger and jealousy, feelings he'd not known for a long while and, like a longtime vegetarian sitting down to a steak, was surprised that his taste for such meat had not diminished."

Larry dismisses most of these jealousy pangs as byproducts of meditation, but each new thing adds to his suspicions. He even begins to wonder whether it is all playacting for some acting exercise. One evening Eleanor arrives home very late, and when she offers what seems to be a plausible explanation (being a little drunk, taking a wrong turn and getting lost), Larry immediately starts poking holes through the excuse, antagonizing her even more.

On another day Larry surprises her at the acting workshop only to find that his entrance was almost … expected? The acting teacher immediately welcomes Larry and invites him to stay during the acting exercise, allowing Larry to watch a variety of informal performances. It does little to allay his suspicions. If anything it reminds Larry of how easily his perceptions and attitudes could be manipulated by someone skilled in the acting craft. That makes him even more likely to see through Eleanor's words and gestures, to the point where he is driven to take more drastic measures.

I won't spell out exactly what these events lead to. It is definitely not

what you might think, and the lovely thing about this novel is how skillfully it misleads us along the way. Larry's jealousy drives them closer together – almost suffocatingly so. There are no villains here – just two people trying to figure out whether they belong together and what they really want.

Not only do the novel's conflicts have a universal quality, they essentially represent two different approaches to living. Eleanor's personality ends up frustrating him:

> Larry looked at her, aware as always of her beauty which included not only the wild-child face and hot-woman body, but the gracefulness and sureness of movement born of many years of training for the stage. But for the first time in his life he was also seeing her as an impersonal vortex of energy, as a principle. As a person she could be maddening or delightful, affectionate or hateful, faithful or wanton, and he would be vulnerable to all that. But as a *koan*, she could do nothing that would not feed his insight, intensify his meditation. (Ch. 6)

Let me pause for a moment to admire the dialogue which is some of the best I've encountered. All of Vassi's protagonists speak eloquently, especially when denouncing social convention or making some pronouncement about metaphysics or the nature of sexuality. These speeches are mostly monologues for the benefit of other characters (and the reader). But *Other Hand Clapping* doesn't have any rants or philosophical speeches, just ordinary remarks that any couple might make during a normal day.

Every writer knows the importance of pruning dialogue to leave only the essentials, but striking the right balance between dialogue and action and description is always tough. Especially for the final scene, this novel depends almost entirely on dialogue to create ambiguity, suspense and a range of emotions from hurt to sarcasm to tenderness. As an actress, Eleanor might be inclined towards melodramatic words and gestures, but in fact none of her speeches in the novel are grand or eloquent. That's also true for Larry. Even the acting coach who appears later in the novel uses light-hearted language to express concern or defuse tension at certain moments. The dialogue always feels naked and unadorned and naturalistic. The novel ends up with a fairly throwaway line that is almost too trivial to notice. Indeed, despite having read the novel several times, I am always surprised to find nothing after that.

So what is the book's final line? It's nothing really, just an invitation to

play Scrabble. It's fitting that a novel with Zen sensibilities would end not with a grand insight but a line so ordinary that it was practically a gesture.

Lingering Thoughts

Metasex as a philosophical framework is interesting and compelling, but what about metasex as a lifestyle?

It assumes that people have enough freedom and time to engage in sexual play behavior.

Certain periods of a person's life seem conducive to such explorations and adventures. College years provide that kind of freedom; vacations, retreats and long trips do this too. The beat writers were lauding the itinerant lifestyle in the 1950s; by the 1960s communes and protests were springing up. Vassi went to a cheap public college and hung out at communes and meditation centers where he stayed financially afloat by giving classes. It was easy and convenient to fill this time with navel-gazing and metasex.

In contrast, U.S. students today can barely afford college without taking out loans. After graduation you must start paying these loans (and making payments for the car, health insurance, rent, credit cards, etc.) Or what about living with one's parents – that's hardly the ideal way to foster a radical approach to living. Sure, a little recreational drugs might facilitate a spiritual journey, but then again you have to worry about passing that drug test for the next job (not to mention the employer-mandated background and credit checks). In other words, you are free to spend three day weekends at the commune or take alternative lifestyle classes as long as you keeping making your car payments and still have a job to return to.

Some longer getaways are possible for those who save and plan ahead. There are Peace Corps jobs, missionary excursions, music festivals, art/technology conferences, Burning Man, religious retreats, and seven day cruises. Or does self-discovery have to wait until your retirement? Many teachers get summers off and occasionally sabbaticals. Perhaps it is easier for people in Europe or Asia. Perhaps you can get lucky and win the lottery or inherit money. But for most people, escaping the rat race even for a little while gets to be impossible.

Vassi saw metasex as something you could explore throughout your life. But I see it as something mainly possible when people are in their twenties or thirties. Perhaps if Vassi had lived longer, he would have been able to discover a way to broaden this metasexual perspective into a more long-term and sustainable way of living. (Vassi's longtime friend, lover and

collaborator, Annie Sprinkle, has tried to do precisely that – see her 2021 book, *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover*.)

If Marco Vassi were alive today and I had the opportunity to interview him, my first question would be, "And what about fiction?"

What role can fiction play in the metasexual universe?

The end of *In Touch* reveals that almost the entire novel is nothing more than a crazy dream of Lydia Stone's screenwriting husband. Does that turn the novel into escapist claptrap – or at least undermine the message about whether therapists should involve themselves emotionally in their patients' problems? Or is it simply protesting the contrivance of fiction itself (even if it provides occasional frissons of pleasure)?

A reader might wonder: what benefits does reading erotica bring apart from a few hours of recreational contemplation? Is fiction supposed to inspire or guide a person's actions in the real world? Or is the external world more complex (and messy) than anything depicted in fiction? Is the main purpose of erotic fiction to awaken and perhaps satiate momentary physical impulses in a nonthreatening way? Can it heal people from bad experiences in the bedroom – or even sexual trauma?

An erotica writer might wonder, are there better ways to record and depict erotic dreams? What kinds of erotic dreams are worth writing about – the ones likely to have universal appeal or the ones peculiar to the author's personal history and psychology?

Fiction has character and drama, but it is also a self-contained world controlled by one puppet master. It is less like metatheatre than a sustained meditation. The character's roles are predefined and their actions rarely surprise the author – only readers.

On the other hand, most plays at a theatre are carefully choreographed, leaving little room for improvisation or error. Even the skilled improvisor may sometimes fall back on standard scripted behaviors.

Vassi's sex scenes bask in the sheer physicality of sex. His fiction uses raw language (cunt, cock, etc.) and never shies away from bodily fluids, smells and tastes.

What would Vassi think about metasexual activities like virtual sex or sex with androids where some of the participants have no physicality at all?

The irony of Vassi's vision of metasex is that it depends on presence and physicality and spontaneity – even though in the world of fiction these things remain impossible.

Additional Notes

1. **Michael Perkins on Marco Vassi**. Even though the preface to the 1992 edition of *The Secret Record : Modern Erotic Literature* mentions Vassi's death by AIDS, I am guessing that Perkins' chapter on Marco Vassi (XI. The Metasexual Novel pp. 235-258) was entirely written for the first edition published in 1976. *The Secret Record* mentions *The Mind Blower* (1970), *The Saline Solution* (1971), *Contours of Darkness* (1972), *The French Job*(1973), *Pro Ball Groupie* (1974), *Metasex, Mirth & Madness: Erotic Tales of the Absurdly Real* (1975) and *In Touch* (1975). It includes a brief discussion of his "lesser" novels like *The French Job* and mentions earlier titles for things *(Pro Ball Groupie* was later sold with the title *Tackling the Team* and the half-fiction/half-nonfiction *Metasex, Mirth & Madness* was later published as the *Erotic Comedies*).
Perkins examines in great detail the early *Mind Blower* novel (which is a study of extreme sexual fantasies at the Institute for Sexual Metatheatre). About Vassi's erotic fables, Perkins tersely says that they "do not show Vassi at his best as a writer" and that the *Carcass of Dreams* subtitle "indicates their adolescent tone.... They accomplish a kind of intellectual seduction." While admiring Vassi's sexual descriptions (comparing them to the graphic depictions of violence in mystery novels), Perkins says that: "It is not his imagination but the power of his ideas that make him the most interesting figure in recent erotic literature.... Vassi bothers very little with plot or characterization in his novels. He is a didactic artist, an explorer of eroticism with findings to present: like most such writers from Sade onward, his narrative only serves as a vehicle for the exposition of his ideas."
Pointing out the tension between Vassi's personal philosophies and that of his characters, Perkins says:

> Although he espouses metasexuality, he agonizes over his biological sexuality. He is at times *macho*, jealous, possessive, chauvinistic, and even misogynistic, and these feelings make for painful heterosexual relationships. Frustrated, he seeks escape in impersonal sex with both women and men. He attempts to transcend his biological sex role with all its drawbacks by becoming just the opposite of it. Unity is found only during sex....(p248)

Perkins was an astute critic both of erotic literature and Vassi's fiction. Perhaps if his study had considered Vassi's last work, *The Other Hand Clapping*, Perkins might have revised his opinion about the didactic nature of Vassi's fiction and come to believe (as I do) that Vassi was too subtle a storyteller to view fiction merely as a way to proselytize.

2. (YouTube video). From Mark Stevens' "Lets Talk Dirty" series. Undated, but he says that he was 44 during the interview, dating it between November 1981 and November 1982 (probably spring or summer of 1982). The interview took place at Artists' Cemetery near Woodstock. Vassi said that he'd lived there between 1971-1974 and after moving away to East Hampton, NY, was living there again. He said he would come to that place 3-4 times a week just to sit quietly for an hour or so. He described the area as "almost aggressively anti-erotic – a very conservative square place; there's no sexiness in that area." In this interview Vassi alludes to having recently published a book called *Gay Like Me* (which I can find no record of).
3. **Books about Vassi's life**. I am relying mainly on biographical summaries in John Heidenry's 1997 book, *What Wild Ecstasy: Rise and Fall of the Sexual Revolution*, John Heidenry, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997. This book describes the U.S. sexual revolution as experienced by certain notable individuals (such as Marco Vassi). During his life Vassi shared details about his life in his writings – starting with his 1973 memoir *The Stoned Apocalypse*. Although Heidenry's book summarizes these details, it also fills in gaps about Vassi's life from his 1986 AIDS diagnosis until his death in 1989. It mentions the role that Annie Sprinkle played during those last years. Recently Eve Diana (one of Vassi's girlfriends) published their correspondence when they were together in 1986 before his AIDS diagnosis. (*Shepherd and the Nymph: The Erotic Letters of Marco Vassi and Eve Diana*. Edited by David Steinberg, Red Alder Books, 2020).
4. **Marco Vassi Memorial Archive**. David Steinberg is a writer and fine arts photographer who kept in touch with several of Vassi's friends and lovers after Vassi's death. He met Vassi briefly twice during his final years, but has been collecting papers and memorabilia by and about Marco Vassi over the decades which he calls the "Marco Vassi Memorial Archive." I was fortunate enough to show Mr. Steinberg a copy of this essay, and he corrected the

biographical section for accuracy. Although Vassi's own writings provide lots of detail and insight about his life, Steinberg provides a different perspective. In 2023 I interviewed David Steinberg about Vassi's life, and you can read the full interview here.

5. **Marriage and Vassi.** Marco Vassi describes this relationship with Hatsue in great depth in Chapter 3 of his 1992 collection of essays, *A Driving Passion*. In his 1997 book, John Heidenry writes in a footnote:

> No one is quite sure how many times Marco Vassi was married, though most estimates range from eight to nine. Several were heavily SM in orientation. Since his liaisons, both legally recognized and casual, are far too numerous to chronicle, and were both heterosexual and homosexual in nature, this book provides only a representative sampling of his career as one of the century's foremost sexual adventurists. Marco also unknowingly fathered out of wedlock a son whom he later legally adopted. *(Heidenry, p. 421)*

6. **Catholicism and Vassi**. During the YouTube interview, when asked what career he would have if he weren't an erotic writer, Vassi playfully answered "Catholic cardinal," while also calling organized religion "an unfortunate occurrence." Despite being a "sexual explorer," Norman Mailer noted that Vassi

> was born and raised a Catholic. If Catholicism has many faces, its presence in the psyche of a sexual explorer must be felt first as a great weight. Marco Vassi was a mountain climber who carried this impost in his psychic knapsack, and what it must have cost him is hard to measure. (Preface, *A Driving Passion* by Marco Vassi, 1992.)

7. **Metasex essay**. This fascinating essay (which appears in the ebook *Erotic Comedies*) contains a transcription error which I corrected in the quote. The ebook shows, "processing human beings on a *conveyor build* of pseudo-knowledge the way automobile parts are run through on an assembly line," but I feel 99.9% certain that the text should have said "*conveyor belt*."

8. **Homosexuality/Bisexuality**. I didn't have time to delve into this topic for the essay (which is already running long). But Vassi has written lots about the topic in both his essays and fiction. See *A Driving Passion* and the second half of *Erotic Comedies* ebook (which contains his "Collection of Bones" essays). Typically in Vassi's fiction, a male protagonist has a semi-monogamous relationship with a woman, but then goes out to have casual sex with other people (men as well as women). Based on my reading, Vassi wasn't adamantly gay (and really didn't make grand political statements about gay rights although he most certainly would have supported it). He seemed more "omnisexual" and wrote in his Metasex essay that "to label the action homosexual or bisexual or heterosexual is divisive, alienating us from one another as human beings." Yet Vassi and his characters often point out differences in the sexual dynamics between hetero and gay fucking. Here's how the protagonist in *The Saline Solution* describes it:

> The one advantage homosexual sex seemed to have over all this was that it took place between people who had a more precise understanding of one another's desperation. I have punished women, and meant it; I have punished men, but never forgotten that it was theatre. For me, the man who slaps my face is helping me to get my scene together; the woman who rakes my back wants literally to destroy me. (Ch. 5).

9. **When was *The Other Hand Clapping* written?** The answer may never be known, but Goodreads shows that the book was first published November 1, 1987 and *Publishers' Weekly* printed a review on November 2, 1987. Vassi struggled with celibacy and jealousy until his final years, so one might have guessed that it was one of his later creations. Yet David Steinberg reports in a private email to me, "I have a note that he wrote it in 1977, then re-wrote it in 1984." Consistent with this is the fact that the erotic letters of Marco Vassi and Eve Diana (which covers February 19, 1986 to July 13, 1987) make no mention of this novella. Frankly it astonishes me that this chaste and spiritual novella was composed at approximately the same time as the wildly transgressive *Carcass of Dreams*.

10. **Celibacy Adventures**. Perhaps because of growing older, Vassi – like the couple in *The Other Hand Clapping* – had become interested in celibacy and what it could offer. In his letter to Eve Diana, Vassi writes:

> Celibacy has strong appeal. I've not been celibate for more than a few months in my life, and then it was because of my situation rather than as a result of a decision. It seems to me I can't claim that my metasexual and erotic education is complete until I've been celibate for a year or so. But I don't know if I can do it. (*Shepherd and the Nymph*, April 2, 1986)

Thank you for finishing this book! Please look for Volume 2 of this series which should be available in late 2024. Also look for the Lusty Bibliophile Book Reports which will appear on the Internet every three months (starting in September 2023). Visit **www.ripemangotaketwo.com** website to learn more. You can also read about the history and origin of this story project or view a list of (non-erotic) ebook titles offered by Personville Press.

Suggest a Last Line

In the story you have just read (i.e., this or that) two lovers talk, and one proposes acting out a sexual fantasy on Saturday night. But I don't reveal anything about the nature of this fantasy until the last line (when the second person poses a question).

By not revealing the sexual fantasy until the story's end, I hoped to provoke the reader's curiosity.

I actually wrote a last line for this story. But as soon as I wrote it, I realized that what I wrote wouldn't be half as interesting as what the reader imagined it to be. The key elements of this story were the fact that the narrator found the lover's fantasy disturbing and yet eventually consented to it for the sake of the lover's happiness. What question would the reluctant lover want to ask before going through with it?

Here are some things to think about:

- This is a couple in love ... or are they?
- What did you expect that the fantasy was? What did you fear that it was?
- What kind of sexual thing could a lover propose to you which would make you uncomfortable? How would you have responded? Under what circumstances might you have been willing to consider the idea?

Your Assignment

I have been compiling a list of last lines which other people have suggested for this story. This list of last lines will eventually be published (anonymously) in a future volume of the Existential Smut series.

Here is how to send me your answer:

1. Go to the **www. ripemangotaketwo.com** website.
2. Look for the link that says **Reluctant Lover**. That will take you to a contact form and more specific directions.
3. Anonymous answers are ok, but you will need to indicate your gender. Important Note: If you send me an answer using the contact form, you are allowing the Existential Smut series to republish this line in a future volume.

Note #1: Do not worry about whether your answer is clever or original. That is not important. The important thing is that you write down the first

idea that popped in your mind without censoring. Your answer can be crude or bizarre or silly or cruel or seductive or ironic or just boring. It doesn't have to be a "great" ending. It just has to fit what you think the final line would be.

Note #2 If you are an established erotica writer and would like your posted last line to include a link to your other online fiction, mention it in your submission and I'll consider it.

Note about Genders

I am a cis man and so I originally wrote the story with the man suggesting the fantasy to the woman (who was the protagonist). Later I tried reversing genders and point of view. Men having weird and vulgar fantasies seems to follow the stereotype, but when women do, that was something new and unusual. Ultimately, when I removed the last line, I realized it didn't matter which gender was the narrator.

So I decided to provide two different versions of the same story: one for the male reader and one for the female reader. In each version, the character proposing the sexual fantasy will always be the opposite of your own. (This doesn't really take the gay or trans perspective into account; I'm sorry).

Regardless of which version you read or what your gender identity is, I look forward to reading your responses and sharing the ones I collect from readers.

|| Go to the next story ||

Interludes

This section contains "interludes" or commentaries about the previous stories between Lisa and the narrator. Generally you shouldn't read these things until after you have finished reading a story (at the bottom will be a link to the corresponding interlude). Although all the interludes are here together, generally you should only read the one interlude and then click the hyperlink that returns you to the current story or to the next one.

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Interlude: A Friendly Beheading (Start Reading here!)

"I've never enjoyed books with frame stories," Lisa said to me. "They are just a roundabout way for the author to insert editorial opinions."

"That's not totally unexpected," I replied. "But at least it provides a kind of story break."

We had stopped by MacDonald's to eat something quick before a concert. Both of us had taken the same literature class at college and occasionally talked about book stuff in real life. In the Real World ™, people rarely talked about books at all, so having a "literary buddy" to exchange book thoughts was convenient and helpful. Lisa finished twice as many books as I did (and had twice as many opinions), so I tended to be her literary sounding board. Her book critiques were fussy or outlandish or annoying but always amusing. The fact she was pretty and charming had nothing to do with it.

"Nobody remembers a story frame when the stories are already interesting," Lisa said. "Even *Scheherazade* and the sultan never had deep discussions; why would they?"

"It's been a while since I read *Arabian Nights*," I said. "If I recall, the story frame's main purpose was to provide a little suspense. Would Scheherazade lose her head?"

"But did we really worry that Scheherazade might lose her head?" Lisa said. "Story frames should have to do more than that."

"Like what?" I asked.

"I don't know. Many things. Maybe the author could hint at character motivation. Or anticipate reader objections. Or maybe drop clues about what stories are supposed to mean."

"Perhaps," I said. "But that puts an extra burden on the author to be interesting. And didn't John Barth write that the author was dead?"

"No, that was the other Barth."

"Whatever. But surely you're not implying that the best commentator for a work of fiction would be the author himself?!"

"Or herself," Lisa said, smiling. "I guess it's best for the flesh-and-blood author to shut up about their books and stop creating sock puppets to explain everything to the reader. Death to all sock puppets!"

"Agreed. And let readers supervise the beheadings – after first making sure that none of them are sock puppets themselves. Online it can be hard to tell the difference, you know."

"Indeed," Lisa said, pointing an imaginary gun at me and pulling the

trigger.

Slumping in my chair, I tried valiantly to eat one more Chicken McNugget before succumbing to a untimely demise.

Now that you have finished this interlude example, click below to **return to your previous place or to advance to the **next story**.

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Interlude: Especially When

Lisa has second thoughts about the deal. The narrator reassures her. Or does he?

Lisa telephoned me the next evening.

"Listen, I don't feel comfortable with reading your fantasies," she said. "It seems too private, too weird, even a little creepy."

I half-chuckled. "So overnight I turned into a creep?"

"It's not my job to feed anyone's obsessions. It's unhealthy. One of my exes would send long notes talking about his feelings and how often he thinks about me. A real nut job. I am *so* over him."

I listened politely, thinking about her words. "Talking about his feelings?" "Saying how often he thinks about her?" Many would be happy if a boyfriend acted like that. How interesting that a girl would regard the same behavior as "wonderful" coming from a current beau but "scary" coming from anyone else.

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea," she continued. "I like you – *as a friend* – but I'm not your psychologist or even your sex therapist. I don't even want to go there."

I paused. "It's only a few stories, each a few pages, nothing to get worked up about. Do you really think I'm a pervert?"

"No, but remember that you should think of me only as a friend. Don't get the impression that I'm reading a story because I'm 'interested.'"

"Obviously," I said. "Look, do you want me to send you these fantasy stories or not?"

"I want you first to promise that you don't have feelings for me and aren't showing these stories as a pretext for anything else."

"Lisa, don't be silly. If that unlikely event were to occur, do you realize what it would mean? The death of the friendship, that's what. More importantly, it would mean that I could no longer share these fantasy stories with you."

"Good," she said. "Next agenda item: you cannot cross certain borders. If you send me some sick sadistic garbage, I not only will refuse to read anything more; I'll also stop being your friend."

"You have nothing to worry about."

"Do you promise?"

"I promise."

"Fine, I look forward to reading your first story, " she said, hanging up.

The bluntness of that conversation surprised me. This stuff really

worried her, while I regarded it as just a titillating game. I also had to admit that I desired Lisa very much. Quite frankly, I was turned on by the fact that she consented to follow my stories (however reluctantly) and looked forward to some kind of dialogue. Yes, in a way I wanted this game to lead to physical contact and ultimately to love, although I had already resigned myself to its impossibility. In order to participate in this game, you need to forswear sexual interest in a person. Sounds like a rotten deal for the guy, but it was better than nothing, I suppose.

The foundation for this game was based on a lie. Still, Lisa had (apparently) given me her trust, and I could do nothing to violate that trust. It was a delicate balance. Perhaps I trusted myself less than Lisa did; truthfully, I worried whether my desire to describe fantasies would cause me to take things too far (or at least too far for her liking). We humans are stupid at guessing people's tolerance levels; our only saving grace is an infinite capability for forgiveness.

Lisa, a man who takes refuge in fantasy also ends up lying to himself and those he cares about. Especially when he tries to tell the truth.

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Interlude: If it's not important ... Why?

Lisa asks, "Why write erotica when people are dying in the Middle East?" The narrator tries to answer, but stumbles.

When I met Lisa at a cafe, I expected feedback about the most recent story I showed her titled *The Porn Star and the Choir Boy*. It was a harmless little piece, but Lisa wanted to talk about porn from a feminist perspective. (Did I mention that she had majored in Gender Studies?)

"Ultimately," Lisa said. "Erotica isn't important. It's just a retreat from the burdens of living."

"I wouldn't disagree," I said. "But that's true for all fiction. "

"No, literature is different from erotica," Lisa said. "Literature offers perspective and fresh insight into life as we know it."

"But many literary works have no social significance. Jack London or fairy tales are what they are – nothing else. Fun tales to keep you entertained."

"Then they have no value," Lisa said. "Fantasies ought to have value. Stories that are merely pornographic just trivialize sexuality."

"Sure," I said. "That's the point."

"You may say stories about the promiscuity of teenage girls are harmless, but they distract readers from sexual exploitation when it actually happens. Maybe porn doesn't cause sexual abuse (not in normal people anyway). But it undermines your sense of outrage. If you served on a jury during an aggravated rape case, and you had read or watched dozens of rape fantasies in your personal life, wouldn't that influence your unconscious attitudes?"

"Please," I said, "let's not talk about these things. It's a never-ending debate."

"Why not? First, you say erotica doesn't have any positive value. Then you don't want to talk about harms. But if nothing is redeeming about erotica, why have it at all?"

I didn't have an easy answer here. When talking about porn and erotica, it's hard to have rational debate; I can talk only about what I feel. It seemed futile to try to construct a philosophical and sociological defense of erotic literature compelling enough to shoot down the sociological harms.

"Erotica," I said, "is simply a description of the sexual things we imagine, whether we are actively involved in them or simply a spectator to them. Then, these descriptions are molded, refined (and yes, censored) to

produce experiences which not only titillate but leave an indelible mark on the brain."

"But the human brain can only store so much," Lisa said. "The time spent contemplating orgies is time the brain could be thinking about the Middle East or homelessness or ecological devastation. If I were homeless or hungry, how would erotica make a difference? Why would I care?"

"The homeless man might disagree. These sexual experiences (real or imagined) can be the only positive thing in his day. His erotic imagination could be his last remaining luxury."

"Maybe. But why should you write it? Your time would be better spent going to a social function or making human contact – real human contact – not the glistening hypothetical kind you find in fiction. Fundamentally, the act of writing an erotic story is an act of isolation. Masturbation and isolation. Why would you – or anyone else – do it?"

"That is a gloomy assessment, to put it mildly," I said, chuckling. "I suppose you could indict most artistic expression in the same way. Perhaps what justifies this isolation is the attempt to use stories to connect with society. Maybe some people just write for themselves, or maybe some intend to write for others without ever really succeeding. Writing erotica is an attempt to put the scariest and most irrational impulses into words. Writing (and rewriting) allow us to reformulate these impulses and yes, to humanize them. There are risks in using words to capture these secret thoughts. Yes, I admit that. But when you write, you are expressing confidence that humans can express or read about these things without turning into savages. It is this faith and optimism that ultimately redeems the erotic writer."

"Or ultimately what dooms him," Lisa said.

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Interlude: One Lesson

Lisa and the narrator share contradictory views on the erotic life of a college student.

The Saturday after I sent Lisa the link to my story *Germs*, she met me for lunch. I asked if she read it (she had) and what her reaction was. She feigned boredom and said, "All right, I guess. "

"You didn't like it?"

"College students discovering passion is not exactly an original subject."

"That's the best age to write about," I said. "College is when you are young, energetic and open to new experiences."

Lisa scowled. "In college," she said, "you witness people in various degrees of seriousness using the same word: love. Some just want the thrills of ecstasy without the responsibility; some are deeply committed to love and rattled when partners don't feel the same way; some succumb to a night of romance and later feel the burden of a relationship they've lost all passion for. Some settle for less-than-love just to be rescued by the boredom of solitude. Some let romance turn them into needy or resentful people. Some are merely confused, unsure of what they are feeling or what they even want; Some enjoy love only for the pride of conquest or adventure; some enjoy it for the companionship or the sense of fulfilling another's needs. College is a time to love and hurt and play."

"You make college sound so dangerous," I said. "Maybe it is. But it's the only time when you have total freedom to pursue your passions. Better in college than later."

"You remember the freedom but forget the frustration and pain. That's why people romanticize their youth."

"I'll be honest," I said. "I look back at college and wish I wasn't so bashful about confessing romantic feelings. I wish I had overcome my fear of rejection and just spoken from the heart –"

"In order to get laid."

I laughed. "Well that certainly was a part of it. And that was partially the reason I wrote *Germs* – to imagine what it would be like to pursue a passion instead of letting it wither away."

"Trust me, you're better off erring on the side of caution. College students are thoughtlessly cruel about passions. They talk about love and sex without a sense of empathy or how deep passions can run."

"Maybe," I said, "but to tell the truth, I now wish I had subjected myself to a little more thoughtless cruelty. Instead, college was a record of what

should have transpired and didn't. I sometimes look back and wonder about my semi-crushes, the girls who were sorta cute, but not enough to awaken deep passion. My reasons for dismissing some girls at the time (looks, clashing interests, superficial defects), now seems inconsequential. In retrospect, my preferences seemed so limited. Many of these people would have been pleasant to become involved with, not as longtime lovers, but intimate, sensual friends."

"That's a typical male view. When I look back at college, I usually end up composing a list of men I wish I had avoided."

"By now our preferences are different," I said. "We become more tolerant about certain kinds of people, less tolerant about others. At college I was quick to label, quick to judge. You cannot feel desire for a person you have already judged inadequate. I would love to revisit college today and spend more time with certain kinds of women, less time with others."

"You are naive," Lisa said. "Do you really think an extra tryst or two at college would have made you happier or wiser?"

"In a word, yes."

"Your mistake," Lisa said, "is believing experience to be the best teacher. College students hunger for new experience; that's natural. But they also read textbooks on ethics, psychology and justice. Shouldn't these things count for something? The first time love happens, one is tempted to disregard books and lectures. Love seems strange, unique and mysterious. But experience has only one lesson to teach: disillusionment."

"Some things have to be experienced firsthand. Love, for instance. "

"No, they don't!" Lisa said. "You don't need to put your hand in a pot of boiling water to know it's going to hurt. Sociology, psychology, religion and philosophy help you to avoid repeating mistakes of people before us."

"Don't forget literature and film," I said. "Literature classes offer more guidance into living than all the other subjects combined."

"Oh really? What does literature actually teach us .. aside from curiosity or even hunger for additional experiences? "

"If I recall," I said, "the Greeks thought drama had a positive cathartic effect on spectators. There, you see; my English classes did teach me a thing or two."

"But that's like saying – "

"Wait," I said, "let me finish. A novel or film lets you pass through an imaginary event in slow motion – with the guidance of someone who has already pondered its meaning and rendered it in a provocative way. As long as you remember that it is artifice (and subject to manipulation), the lessons of fiction are no less profound than raw experience."

"So what is the point of 'Germs'? Should college students confess their secret crushes? Did it make the protagonist any happier?"

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Interlude: Alexander Portnoy vs. Carrie Bradshaw

The narrator and Lisa discuss the male and female versions of sex-obsessed protagonists. Is Carrie Bradshaw the female Portnoy?

"The story was okay, but it sounds a lot like Portnoy," Lisa said to me a day after reading my *Miniature Golf* story. "Did you do that on purpose? People are just going to read it and compare it to *Portnoy's Complaint*. Rather than retell Portnoy, you'd be better off writing it with a different character and voice."

I was annoyed. Sure, I had read Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* once upon a time. But why reduce every story to its literary predecessor? That book was certainly notorious, but was it a classic? And could anyone really accuse my story of being a slavish imitation?

"Congratulations," I said. "You're the first woman to know about *Portnoy's Complaint*. It's a thrilling read for college guys – it's probably their first opportunity to hear the uncensored thoughts of a young man obsessed with sex. Portnoy has a bawdy sense of humor, but he also succeeds with a variety of women in the book – I mean, the women of Roth's imagination. If Portnoy can succeed, there's hope for horny guys everywhere."

"And what about love?" Lisa said.

"What about it?"

"Portnoy seems allergic to it; what he calls love is just an obsession with his own phallus – complete with oral sex, four letter words and Gentile bimbos who cannot speak a coherent sentence. Quite frankly, it's alarming to think this vulgar tale could be regarded as a model for living."

"You are saying nothing new here." I said. "You aren't really his intended audience. How did you find out about it anyway?"

"It was on Travis's bookshelf." Travis was her boyfriend in her final year of college. "I don't think he finished it. There was a bookmark at about page 100, but I went ahead and read the whole thing."

"And what did you think?"

"It had funny moments, and certainly was a fast read, but nothing special. Later I learned the author was highly-regarded in literary circles. Sorry, no more Roth for me."

"Who would be the female Portnoy these days?"

"What a ridiculous question," Lisa said. "The modern woman is already too sexualized in literature and movies. No matter how far civilization

advances, there will never be a shortage of stories about woman nymphomaniacs – stories generally written by men, by the way."

"But is *Portnoy's Complaint* really pornographic fiction?" I asked. "It's pure confession (and self-loathing); men would be more inclined to find it funny than titillating."

"And pathetic."

"Yes. But where are the neurotic sexual confessions by women?"

"Women don't confess," Lisa said. "They chat. They reminisce. They watch *Sex in the City* episodes."

"So is the Carrie Bradshaw character the female Portnoy?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Carrie Bradshaw is a romantic, a hopeful, positive character. Everyone likes her. Successful, somewhat insecure, but honest about her feelings."

"– who also boinks a lot."

"You're missing the point. For Carrie, sex is not dirty; it's just what normal adults do in their quest for love. But it's also a game, a form of entertainment not to be taken too seriously."

"So Portnoy's problem is that he takes sex too seriously!?"

"Exactly," Lisa agreed. "By obsessing over vulgar anatomical details, Portnoy seems pathetically needy. And so does the character in your story. These Portnoy characters lack a sense of beauty and the sublime. They have no heart."

"It's probably not right to compare a sitcom character with a literary character. The external features are what attracts us to sitcom characters, not their complex interiors. But if Portnoy were a sitcom character played by Jude Law or Chris Noth, would his chauvinistic remarks seem so terrible? Perhaps Carrie might even find it irresistible."

"Don't be silly. Portnoy is an outcast. No outcast can be charming to a woman like Carrie. Carrie enjoys society, while Portnoy seems almost revolted by it. He is socially inept, insecure, angry."

"But is charm really necessary for sympathy?"

"No," she said, "But it is necessary for seduction."

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Interlude: Behavioral Adaptations in the Chapada

A young entomologist in Brazil writes a letter to her boyfriend back home about the vagaries of the human heart.

After reading the previous story, Lisa dropped me a line.

"My first thought after reading this," Lisa said, "is that the protagonist is a fool. While the man pines away for his beloved, his girlfriend is probably flirting with dozens of South American men or even having a fling. A love letter provides one point of view, leaving no way for the reader to know if this outpouring of emotions is justified or genuinely felt. Often it is an exercise in self-delusion or futility. Love letters are a manifestation of a feeling better expressed in other ways. If the world had no love letters, the world would be a happier place.

"In Ovid's Heroides, a woman's responses to a man's love letters shed light on the man's romantic delusions. Helen's cheeky replies to Paris' love letter revealed her dislike of his sense of entitlement and lack of decorum ... even as she admitted her mutual desire. So here's my rewrite of the same letter-story, told from Mary's perspective. Enjoy.

Teddy,

Thank you for your recent letters. They were sweet. I am sorry I haven't written recently.

Seven months ago I left for the Chapada expecting to return to Ohio State and continue my studies (and our relationship). But something happened in Brazil. My perspective changed.

Entomologists and ecologists from all over the world are here. Everyone is working on a research project; the place is bursting with grant money. All the projects needs research assistants, so I'll have no problem finding work. Everyone is treated equally here, whether you are a leading scientist or a first year graduate student. People tell me I'd have no difficulty receiving a Fulbright or USAID grant to continue my field research. A local agricultural school even offered me a part time teaching position. It's great!

But that is not all. I met somebody – a Peruvian ecologist named Mario. It happened gradually. I met Mario on one of my first expeditions to Chapada dos Veadeiros. He was away from home too, so we immediately connected for reasons I won't go into. I resisted my initial attraction out of loyalty to you. But as time went by and Mario and I became better acquainted, I began to reflect on what kind of relationship you and I were trying to grow.

Things were fine in Ohio, but now I'm living in a different habitat surrounded by different kinds of people. I've had no problems adapting. If you remember, I said I'd be travelling a lot for my academic career. Back then it didn't seem like a big obstacle. But everyone here warns me about how hard it is to work in the forests and keep a family back in the States. Everyone struggles with it. I'll probably need to do that for five or ten years before I can even think about settling down. Perhaps I could eke out a career as an entomologist in Ohio. But if I left Brazil, I'd never be able to realize my potential. This land offers a lifetime of subjects to study and enormous freedom to do so; I couldn't just make occasional trips like a tourist. The land needs me.

By the way, I collect lots of insect specimens during my outings. Two of them haven't been identified yet. I may have discovered a new species …maybe several! (See my drawing below).

The one on the bottom is a dark walking stick with a fork-like tail who lives on the bark of a mangrove tree. I came across this little critter the day I first met Mario. The leaf beetle on the top is pale yellow with black spots, plus a circular gray ribbon around it; he fell on my lap while I was eating lunch. Can you believe that?

I told Mario about you from the beginning, and he respected our relationship. It took two tense months before I finally decided that Mario was the man I needed to be with. Even when we started, I wasn't sure; the main reason I extended my trip by three months was to test out my feelings for Mario. These last few months have been a whirlwind to me…but I have come to realize that Mario and I are meant to be together. It's funny; I was also happy with you as well, and a part of me still wonders if I am making the wrong decision.

Originally I wanted to tell you in person, but after I decided to extend my stay again, it seemed unfair to keep you in the dark any longer. (That is why I asked Elizabeth to hand deliver this letter – to make sure it would not be lost in the mail). I will call during my next visit to Brasilia, but I wanted you to know the situation first.

Truly, Teddy, I am sorry. I have spent the last few months in turmoil, wondering how to break the news. A part of me cares about you. I don't deny it. There are times when I reminisce about our happy times and warm embraces. I wish distances were not such obstacles – if we tried to stay together, we would always have to deal with letters that take forever to arrive, and all the expensive telephone bills and airline tickets. I did a lot of soul-searching. What is best for us? What is best for you? What is best for me? What is best for Mario? Even if I went back and we resumed our relationship as before, I would still have to leave you many times. Maybe we could have arrived at a compromise; maybe you could have accompanied me on a few trips, or moved overseas. Would it have worked? Could you have adapted? I'd prefer dealing with the problem now before it starts hurting us.

Maybe you think I will change my mind or that Mario will. I assure you: that will not happen. Mario is a kind, honest man. I love him very much, and I know he loves me too.

You are focused on understanding human psychology and the complexity of human interactions. I am a scientist and explorer. My world is filled with new species and habitats. In fact, these habitats are disappearing at an alarming rate. Mario already understands this. I do not need to explain to him why these things matter so much to me. Together, Mario and I could make such a difference here.

Intellectually I know you can deal with this. You are strong and emotionally mature. You are a realist. Your profession will allow you to meet all kinds of women. My hope is that years later you will look back at my decision and see the wisdom of it.

Not to make light of the situation, but when I read your last letter (about backrubs with Tanya), I almost laughed. If only you had succumbed to Tanya's charms, my task now would be so much easier! I suppose Tanya wasn't right for you, but sometimes comfort can come from unlikely places. Sometimes, reveling in the moment is more important than deferring future joys. Maybe you view yourself as the wronged party, but I didn't wrong anyone. I chose a path, and I have no idea whether it will confer the greatest advantage. I can only do what my heart thinks is best.

Perhaps this decision will free new romantic possibilities and help you to meet someone more compatible. In retrospect, maybe we were too eager to commit to something we weren't ready for. Perhaps we were clinging to the safety of the past and blind to the future. But we all adapt.

Please write back, but first, take a day or so to forget about me. Go out with friends – don't keep it inside. When you love someone so far away,

you are left with nothing but cold lonely summers; it feels like an enormous weight pressing against your chest. Eventually you grow acclimated. Later, when the burden is removed, you won't be happier, but the air will be easier to breathe.

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Interlude: 30 Love

Lisa and the narrator debate the sexiness of chasing balls.

"It's no surprise that such women exist," Lisa said after reading the story of the multiorgasmic teenage girl, "but who cares about them really."

"What do you mean?"

"Does it really matter how many times a woman can orgasm in a certain timespan? It doesn't make somebody a better lover or more interesting sexually."

"I guess that's right," I agreed. "But still it's amazing to see what some people manage to do with their bodies."

"Then watch a woman's soccer game or tennis match," Lisa said. "Watching a girl score a goal or make a free throw is just as remarkable and exciting."

"I hardly think you can compare having orgasms to having a good backhand."

"Indeed, having a good backhand is harder!"

I didn't know what to say (and I wasn't good at tennis or any team sport). I admit that seeing athletic woman or teenage girls perform at tennis matches or the Olympics was a kind of turnon. The inescapable conclusion – that woman must find it a turnon to watch male athletes perform on the football field or basketball courts – seemed only logical even though it had never occurred to me until now. Silly me, I had always assumed that females found brooding literary types to be just as sexually attractive as Olympics athletes.

"As long as she is consenting," I said, "I see nothing wrong with a woman showing her orgasms to a person or a camera. Sure, it kills the mystery, but it's still better to see sexual pleasure experienced by an actual person than simply imagining it in a dark room."

"But that's just a performance," Lisa said. "It's not a spontaneous event or part of a relationship. Watching it happen is like watching a professional tennis player practice serving for an hour instead of playing an actual game."

"Watching a great athlete practice for a game could still be fun," I said, "– although it's probably more fun to play in a game than to watch others play. Do you still play tennis?" I knew Lisa used to play on her high school tennis team (and even kept her tennis racket in a prominent place in her college dorm).

"Not as much," Lisa said. "Over time, it becomes harder to find people at your level to play with. And even when you find a suitable partner, it's always hard finding a time that works for both people's schedule. Are you inviting me to play?"

"Maybe," I said, embarrassed to realize that I didn't even own a tennis racket. "Actually it's been a few years – I doubt I would be serious competition for someone like you."

"It doesn't matter," Lisa said. "It's always good to play against someone slightly better than oneself."

I knew that Lisa could beat me on the tennis court without even trying, and I didn't mind that. But I wasn't even sure I could serve or even hit the ball back reliably. Did I really want to call attention to my lack of athletic prowess?

"I probably should practice a bit before the two of us play tennis. I probably don't even remember the rules."

"Someone could always teach you," Lisa said, smiling.

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Interlude: Age Differences

In erotic fiction, how old should the characters be? Lisa and the narrator disagree.

One Saturday morning I picked up Lisa at the car repair shop to drive her home. I was still half-asleep, but Lisa was talkative and full of energy. In the car she mentioned random things: her boss's stupid rules, a mushroom soup she planned to cook later and and a new phone which all of her friends were raving about. Then, out of the blue, she mentioned my story *The Revolting Breast*.

"I'm glad the people in this story actually have ages. It's maddening to read fiction where nobody's age is identified. "

"That's no different from real life," I said. "After college it's rare to know for sure how old people are."

"But you need a mental picture," Lisa said. "The author doesn't need to mention every external characteristic of a person, but at minimum the reader should know the sort of things obvious to any casual onlooker. If a person is 90 years old or obese or wears an eye-patch, the reader should always know that."

"A timeline was vital for this story," I said, "So I had to specify dates and years. But erotic stories work better if they don't mention ages at all."

"Why?"

"Readers want stories about young people," I said. "If a character's age makes her seem less nubile or sensuous, it's less arousing to read. It's better to leave these things to the imagination."

"I'm all in favor of the imagination," Lisa said. "But any world populated by 18 and 19 year olds seems artificial (and even a little whiny). When you ignore age, you ignore complexity of motives. The past holds secrets, and part of erotica is uncovering these secrets."

"Oh really!?" I replied. "Maybe that's true in real life, but in erotic fiction the past burdens a story. It may be interesting to know that a character had a personal trauma as a child, but stories needs to go forward, not backwards. Constructing backstories may be a useful exercise, but the revealing of a secret rarely increases a story's erotic potential. Anyway, most of these so-called revelations just waste time. Did you ever watch the TV show *Lost*? It tosses in so many flashbacks that nothing gets resolved. It's all a fiendish plot to keep people watching ads."

"I hated *Lost*," Lisa said. "And flashbacks quickly grow tiresome. But when you make every character the same age, you limit the variety of

characters and situations."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing," I said. "Men and women seem to be wired differently about appearance and age. As a man I will always be more attracted to young women. It's a biological fact. I doubt that I would ever find an amazing 40 year old to be as sexy as an average 20 year old."

"Don't confuse sexual attractiveness with youthfulness," Lisa said. "Older people have other ways to be attractive; they can even be more wild and adventurous in the bedroom."

"But if I watched two porn movies – one starring an 18 year old girl, the other a 40 year old woman – I would generally prefer the one with the 18 year old. Of course, a porn video is inherently a visual and superficial medium."

"Have you watched many porn movies starring 40 year old females?" Lisa asked.

"No."

"Have you ever made love to a 40 year old woman?"

"No."

"Then how do you know it wouldn't be a turn on?"

"I don't. It's just a matter of biology."

"Men and women must have different arousal buttons," Lisa said. "I find older men to be just as attractive as younger ones. I would even date a 40 year old man if he were the right person. For me (and maybe all women), sexual attractiveness depends on a man's personality and his sense of himself."

"Maybe at 40 you will feel differently," I replied.

"I think women are more flexible and open-minded about sex and love. We are better able to appreciate the total person than what's on the surface."

I paused. Lisa had the tendency to extol a woman's viewpoint for its own sake. Does each gender cling to whatever stereotype is most flattering?

I knew Lisa to be 24 years (I think). She was gorgeous. Ten years from now her body would be less gorgeous even though her seductive powers would still be considerable. By 44 she would probably still have the energies and enthusiasm of a younger woman (even though her physical appearance would probably seem unremarkable). At 54 she would probably have no sex appeal at all (even though her erotic history would remain a subject of immense fascination to me). At 64, her sexuality would be nothing more than a cosmic joke. Who knows how repulsive women would find my physical appearance to be at that same age? And maybe when I

reached my sixties, the older version of Lisa would still seem gorgeous to me.

"A person's entire erotic self," I speculated, "is determined by experiences accumulated during those young adult years. By 30 a person has already developed erotic habits and triggers which cannot be unlearned. After that, a person's main preoccupation is how to reawaken those same youthful vigors."

"That is what makes a person's erotic history so important." Lisa said.

"Or unimportant." I said. "I'm interested in a person's erotic life before he or she has time to cultivate habits or expectations."

"You are simply rationalizing your attraction to young and impressionable girls. This kind of passion isn't substantial or healthy. The thought of having a fling is nice, but people eventually prefer something which they can pursue with total passion."

"How can you be sure?" I asked. "And what is total passion anyway? If people were content with more modest feelings, they'd be less susceptible to disappointment. When is a person most susceptible to passion?"

"It's the same point in time," Lisa said, "when romantic opportunities are meager and the heart struggles with solitude."

"And when exactly would that be?"

Return || Next Story

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Interlude: Sexy Impersonations

Are male writers or female writers better at writing stories with sexy females? Lisa and the narrator disagree.

After finishing the story about the jaded stripper, I realized that this was the first story I'd written with a female narrator. It seemed surprisingly easy to write, but would a female reader like Lisa get into it?

A week after I emailed it to her, Lisa called me about something else and mentioned the story in passing. "When a man writes a story about a woman's sex life," she said, "that's when you need to watch out."

"Why?"

"The character becomes an idealized figure, a projection of how he'd want such a woman to behave."

"That's unavoidable," I said. "And many story characters – regardless of gender – start out as simple sketches. Once you enmesh characters in situations and embellish them with distinctive speech patterns, that's when they become real."

"Isn't there something icky," Lisa said, "about a male author trying to describe a female's sexual experiences?"

"Well, females write about male characters all the time."

"Sure. But males have historically held positions of power in society and relationships. A male author can project preconceived notions of how a female ought to behave onto his stories and fail to perceive the power imbalance or even his biases. Imagine a 19th century white man writing a story from the standpoint of a black slave. No matter how hard he tries to make this character sound authentic, he will probably exaggerate some characteristics and ignore others. The white author could use phrases that sound unnatural in the mouth of a slave character. It's the subtle things that even a well-intentioned author can get wrong."

"Sure, it's always a challenge to write about a character of opposite gender," I said. "I have to ask myself, 'Would a female character express a thought or feeling like that?' I'm always going to get some details wrong. But storytelling gives you freedom to try bold – and even stupid – things. Anyway, gender is supposed to be fluid (or that's what I keep reading). If society allows people to identify with whatever gender they feel comfortable with, I suppose one male author can be allowed to identify with one female character for the duration of one short story."

Lisa smiled. She had taken classes in gender studies and written several

papers on the subject. "So your birth certificate says you are male, right?"

"Right."

"And you continue to identify primarily as male, right?"

"Right – though in my fiction I may –"

"That's not what I'm asking," Lisa said. "You express yourself in public mainly as a male. Is that right?"

"Absolutely."

"So writing this story does not mean that you have a secret desire to express yourself as a woman or have characteristics of both female and male genders."

"That's right. Well, except ..."

"What?"

"Once in a while I wonder what it would be like to be female," I said. "And when you read fiction, you too must imagine what being male feels like."

"So you wrote this story with a female protagonist in order to experience the same desire she feels towards other men?"

"No, that's not it at all. The woman in the story intrigues me. I probably would fall for her if I met her in real life."

"Could you write a story about the sexual attractiveness of a male stripper with the same degree of enthusiasm?"

"Maybe," I said. "It could be fun."

"But in such a story, there has to be a sexy woman somewhere, right?"

"I guess so – at least for erotic stories. But the erotic stories I write don't actually have a lot of fucking; they can just be erotic meditations or dreams. And that's something both sexes can indulge in."

"You're right," Lisa said. "But can you – for the sake of a story – imagine what it's like to make love to a man as a woman?"

"I get it. You're trying to prove that I can't describe a woman's sexuality fully without being attracted to a man."

"It's more than that. In an erotic story you can probably describe a man's sexual impulses and actions with realistic detail. But if you tried the same thing with a female character, you'd probably fail. Either you'd try to make it too explicit or not explicit enough."

"I suppose so," I replied. "But people still find Joyce's Molly Bloom interesting to read. She's an interesting and funny character. You could probably say that about all story characters. Readers are always saying that Character X seems fake while Character Y is real or interesting. Convincing a reader that a character is genuine is always going to be hard; gender is just one consideration."

"Suppose a female author wrote two stories about a sexual encounter," Lisa said. "The first story describes the encounter from a female character's point of view. The second describes the same encounter from a male's point of view. Which of the two versions by the female author would you prefer to read?"

"Who knows?" I replied. "Literature is always trying to hoodwink readers about something ... and occasionally succeeding. Didn't Elizabeth Hardwick say that the greatest American female novelist was Henry James?"

"Ms. Hardwick could be such a prick sometimes," Lisa said, half-mockingly.

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Interlude: The Magic Created

Lisa disparages the appeal of the one night stand ... while admitting to having succumbed to its allure.

A week after sending Lisa my story about the "Kinkiest Thing You Can Imagine," she sent this email:

*****

Oh, yes, the fabled one-night stand. The seduction without complications, the excitement without disappointment or regret. Such encounters are frictionless; they lack the subtle negotiations that go on at the beginning of meaningful encounters. To be erotic, seductions require friction and yes, an element of risk.

Maybe these stories are just works of a restless imagination, like giraffes wearing tuxedos or monkeys playing violin while riding unicycles. Perhaps to criticize this kind of notion is beside the point. I have a sense of humor too; for a while I can take off my puritanical glasses and appreciate silliness.

Can a woman or man really indulge in guilt-free sex and enjoy it afterwards? It requires a combination of tolerance and stubbornness. Sexual attractions are fickle; a person who seems sexy today might be gross the day after. The brain either tires or revolts. A momentary passion, when satisfied, no longer seems interesting. Eventually someone has to be thrown out of the bed. The person who is thrown out feels deceived; the person who does the throwing out has to be oblivious to another's pain. But actually that is a kinder form of rejection. More often one person spends the time awaiting the lover's next reappearance, never quite abandoning hope.

I only had one encounter that might be described as a one night stand. I'd always been attracted to a certain man, and one night we found ourselves on a couch together at a friend's party. We hit it off immediately. I always knew there was sexual attraction, but I let myself believe we had also connected on a deeper level. I later realized that this rapid escalation of intimacy was what doomed the relationship to begin with.

Two or three nights of passion, that was all. Then, a world of heartache. I would have loved to be the one to call it off, but I never came to my senses. For weeks I let myself believe that we were something special, that the magic was still there, and I had only be patient. Yes, it was all magic,

the kind you applaud at a show. The magnitude of my self-deception is now obvious, but not a day goes by without my yearning for those magical, beautiful moments once again.

So when you write up these imaginary one-night stands, don't expect my applause. Maybe they seem like harmless titillations. Go ahead, I say. Enjoy yourself. Create your own magic show. But when the show is over and the audience is gone, you'll wonder why you spent so much effort creating a reality instead of trying to understand one.

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Interlude: The Problem with Mental Fucking

Do erotica stories really need a plot too? "Don't confuse sexual tension with dramatic tension," Lisa warns.

A month after sending Lisa my latest story, I ran into her at a professional gathering. Every month a group of people met at a local cafe to discuss ways to help local charities. The group attracted web-savvy individuals who liked to stay involved with the community. By the time I had arrived, everybody was put in small groups to brainstorm ways to increase recycling locally. Lisa was in a different group, so there was no opportunity for us to talk until the end. I was half-inclined (as a joke) to whisper into her ear, "Did you like *The Good Pussy*?" when I had the chance to greet her. But no, that would be crass. Instead, I asked about her group's ideas and whether she thought any were workable. We talked about other things: a local political scandal, her latest boyfriend (Barry?), the magical properties of blueberries. Because people were around, I decided not to bring up my story but ask her tomorrow via email. Amazingly, Lisa seemed to have read my mind; the next morning an email arrived from her on that very subject.

The story I had written sketched my idea of an ideal wife. I wanted to portray a married couple that had conventional sex – while preserving a little kinkiness. Would Lisa buy it?

Lisa's email read:

> Finally, a story about married people! Nice to see that you've discovered that married people are having sex. It's not a bad story, but it's overwritten, and what you undoubtedly regard as poetry would make me (or most woman) just smirk.
>
> I know your heart is in the right place though…
>
> The problem is that there's no plot. Oh, yes, there is that story-within-the-story thing, and that's clever, but ultimately the plot of the story is just, "I love my wife and love having sex with her."
>
> Where is the drama? The couple's relationship in the story may be normal, but there's no plot complication. Don't confuse sexual tension with dramatic tension. It's better to make a sex scene a minor episode of the plot and nothing more. Sex should just happen; it should be incidental to plot (whether it be a thriller, or mystery or sci fi). If a story is about the sex (and

nothing else), you have to deal with the added performance anxiety of trying to make a sex scene sexy.

Reading is a quiet, contemplative activity in a bored individual's mind. Sex is noisy and emotional and instinctive; it is about interacting in physical space and responding to a person's private needs. When an erotic story focuses on inner psychology instead of action, people lose interest; it becomes as arousing as a calculus problem.

The problem with mental fucking is that you forget what real fucking feels like.

That last line of Lisa's email stayed with me. It even irritated me. That was the main reason I wrote these stories — to remind myself what real fucking ought to feel like.

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Interlude: Confessions and their Dangers

Lisa and the narrator debate the value of passionate confessions. "They are a sign of weakness," she says.

"I wish your stories could have fewer confessions and more seductions," Lisa said at the coffee shop. I had sent her my latest story two days ago. "Confessions are meaningless without action. Ultimately, they are about feeding the ego, not furthering love. A confession declares, 'I want!' without requiring action."

"I agree. But a seduction require two people to play."

"Hello? This is fiction, remember?" Lisa chided. "Your characters can do anything they want! "

"Asserting such power makes me uncomfortable. It is no coincidence that erotic authors like Milan Kundera emerged behind the shadows of a totalitarian state, a state that dictated behavior and intruded on people's lives."

"Don't be silly. Kundera's characters were fine and interesting – "

"They were stereotypes!"

"You are overanalyzing Kundera's books. Every artistic depiction reduces the human personality to a few basic traits. That's obvious. Just because a character has straightforward motivations doesn't mean he or she can't come alive. You're just being a prude."

"Maybe you're right," I said. "Maybe my stories need more sex. But most sex scenes in books have an air of unreality; everything sounds corny or cliched or vulgar. Harder, harder! Yes, yes, YES! But in real life people's erotic behavior is not half as interesting as their private thoughts. Confessions provide a glimpse. Nicole Kidman's sexual confession in *Eyes Wide Shut* ... wow! Wouldn't you love eavesdropping on the random sexual confessions of somebody you find attractive (even if you were not the object of this person's desire)? Married man and woman confess things to partners, but unattached people rarely have anyone to confess sexual feelings to. Ironically that's precisely the time when their passionate feelings are most intense. "

"I distrust confessions," Lisa said. "They are a sign of weakness. Most are insincere or have ulterior motives. Proper expressions of love are appropriate for a time and place. When a couple is truly in love, there will be ample opportunities for expressing it."

"That," I said, "presupposes two people who know they are loved in the

first place. And how can you ever know? I once confessed my affections to a woman who upon hearing them refused to see me again. Refused to write or even talk to me. Because she rejected my passionate feelings, she preferred having nothing to do with me. If I had said nothing, maybe we'd still be friends. Confess your passion and be banished from friendship; that's a good reason to keep your mouth shut."

"Shucks, life is tough," Lisa said. "Passion is shared. That's just something you have to accept; it's the risk of loving. But a woman needs to receive signals from a man before some grand confession is announced. Confessions coming out of nowhere almost always strain a friendship. The adored woman rarely shares this intensity of feeling; she hasn't even had time to consider it. And even in the rare case when she feels something, a woman needs evidence that the emotional outburst is not simply the result of one man's private idealizations."

"Well, then, are passionate confessions just futile?"

"Obviously not. But a woman needs to be careful. She needs to check a man's passionate feelings before they turn into obsessions. No woman can afford to ignore the dangers of an obsessed suitor."

"But passions are by definition irrational."

"Obviously. But is the passion directed toward some good or simply towards maintaining the feeling?"

"How can you tell?"

"You can," she replied. "The more dangerous kinds of passions persist even when you try to discourage it."

"Both love and passion seek permanence."

"A dangerous passion must be stopped. It must be killed. Before it goes too far."

"There we have a paradox," I said. "When a passion is moderate or restrained, it can be controlled ... and even terminated. But a passion that is total and all-consuming can sustain itself for an eternity. "

"It can also drive a person crazy!"

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Interlude: Safe Words

Lisa and the narrator debate whether sexual submission is really a turnon. "Isn't it sexier to have two people actively participating?" Lisa asks.

After emailing my *Ice Cube* story to Lisa, I was nervous and excited. It was my most sexually explicit story so far and I wondered if she'd get into it. Sure, I found the fantasy alluring. But would a woman? Would Lisa?

But when I saw her two weeks later, all she did was blurt out a question, "Why are your sex scenes so passive? Isn't it sexier to have two people actively participating?"

"That's not true! After the man used the ice cube, the woman takes over."

"But all she did was take control away from man, not redefine the relationship. Sex is supposed to be a two way street."

"You're talking about morality," I said. "I'm talking simply about what turns people on. People find submission and domination to be turn ons. The more you assert, the more you serve. The more you surrender, the more pleasure you feel."

"But is it really a turn on? Yes, I know, sometimes imagining consent and submission is titillating, but how would it be in real life? Wouldn't boredom set in?"

"Maybe. Or maybe not," I said. "Submission and domination may help delay the onset of boredom. For the submissive, there is the expectation of reward. For the dominant, there is the chance to explore just how far the subservient partner will go to satisfy the master."

"Let me ask a question. Have you actually been involved in one of those dominant/submissive relationships?"

"No."

"Then how do you know what you're talking about!"

She was right, of course. Defending a perversion without experiencing it firsthand did seem dangerous and even delusional. But it wasn't always right (or moral) to require direct experience to imagine what it would be like.

"Let's turn the question around," I said, "how do you know it would be bad? Wouldn't it depend on the individuals involved or the way they played along? I'm not talking about bondage or sadomasochism or cruelty. I'm simply talking about what goes on inside the bedroom. If your dream man treated you lovingly in real life but insisted on complete submission in the bedroom, could you really refuse?"

"Everything has limits," Lisa said. "You cannot escape from freedom, no matter how sexy your master or mistress is. A relationship dependent on dehumanizing mind games won't last long (even if done with the best of intentions)."

"But in erotic fiction everybody is forced to do unusual or forbidden things. Maybe it's not normal (or legal), but that's what the genre is about. To read erotica is to let yourself dream about the thrills of domination or submission."

"No," Lisa said, "you're talking about porn, not erotica. In erotica people treat others with respect and dignity. Love and sex are intertwined. You can still fantasize about a sexual encounter without having to be a victim or victimizer."

Lisa, I observed, frequently distinguished between porn and erotica. For her erotica was sweet and romantic and positive, while porn was dehumanizing and dangerous. But these were just labels; it is harder to distinguish these two things (in reality or fiction). Porn and erotica essentially focused on the physical sensations of sex, mixed with varying degrees of violation and gentle persuasion.

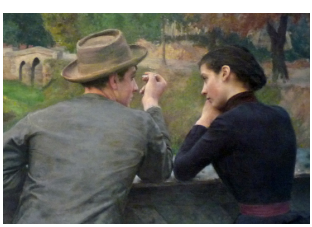
"I'm not talking about victimization," I said. "I'm talking about the giving and taking of control. The challenge of sex is surrendering to another's desire without suppressing your own. Can we assert our will without imposing it on others?"

"True surrender is impossible. You can surrender, but you can't forget yourself. Submission to the will of another is not a natural way to live. Or love."

I looked at her. She was not prepared to back down. At times like these, I realized the futility of trying to make her see my point of view. She smiled in her usual sexy way and waited for my answer.

"Maybe you're right," I admitted.

Return || Next Story



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Interlude: Backup Dreams

Should you avoid dating someone who writes erotic stories? Aren't they too cynical about matters of the heart?

I have therefore written this story of my love affairs – that you may learn about women from me. (*Secrets of Making Love* by Harold Meadows)

Although Lisa was a reliable reader of my stories, sometimes she took forever to get back to me. Just for the hell of it, I gave her a call – just to remind her.

When Lisa answered, I could hear the sounds of people talking and laughing in the background.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"At the beach. Me and my girlfriends took a trip to Myrtle Beach."

"Well, have fun!" I said, wondering whether I should even bring up the subject of my stories.

"So what are you doing this weekend?"

"Nothing as fun as you apparently. I'm setting up a new backup system for my hard drives."

"Boring! You need to get out of town once in a while. Go to the beaches, enjoy the sun, that sort of thing."

"Are you there with Kenneth?" Kenneth was the man she was currently dating (I think).

"No, that bastard made some lame excuse. Something about having to paint his mother's house. Hey, we're about to go into the water. I want to

talk to you about your stories. Can I call you back?"

"Just out of curiosity," Lisa said when she called later, "were you planning to show these stories to people you date … or even a future wife?"

"Eventually," I said. "But not on the first date."

"You're not a pervert, but if I dated a man who wrote naughty stories, I'd be wary."

"But would it disqualify him?" I said.

"No," Lisa said, "but I know you already. But what about that last story – the one about the breakups. It's too cynical; you're always depicting relationships as doomed. That would probably bother me more than the kinky sex. A person might wonder if the writer were even capable of a healthy relationship."

"That's the point," I said. "Understanding why relationships fail helps to understand what makes them work."

"The world doesn't care about lousy lays or tainted love. They only want to hear about occasions when romance succeeds or when the union of two people in sex or marriage produces something remarkable."

"How often does that happen?" I asked.

"That's not the only…" Suddenly another woman takes the phone from Lisa and starts speaking.

"Hello, Kenneth, is that you?" the woman said. "How are you doing?"

"No, April, that's not Kenneth," Lisa said in the background. "That's a friend of mine from high school."

The woman laughed hysterically. "What's your name?"

"Charles."

"Hi, Charles," she said. "So do you think Lisa's butt is too big?"

Several women laughed in the background as I stumbled towards an answer.

"Seriously though, do you think Lisa should buy an electric car?" More laughter. "All of us think she should ditch her oversized gas guzzler and buy a Tesla."

"Sure," I said. "They say great things about the Teslas."

"Hey, Charles…" she said, "You have a sexy voice, do you know that?" More laughter.

Lisa finally grabbed back the phone and apologized. "As you can tell, everyone here has been imbibing … "

"Apparently."

"Back to what we were talking about… What were we talking about?"

"I don't remember. Something about fiction."

"Oh, yes, don't write too much about breakups, or people will think

you're deranged. Love is like a religion. You have to believe in it from the bottom of your heart. Are you a believer? Do you have the faith?"

After an uncomfortable silence, I said, "Really, I don't know how to answer that question."

Lisa made the sound of a TV game show buzzer. "Wrong answer! People don't fall in love with people who give wishy-washy answers. By the way, when am I going to receive your next story?"

"Hopefully soon," I said, hanging up the phone. As I sat trying to imagine Lisa on the beach in a bikini, a dialog message popped up on my computer. BACKUP IS COMPLETE.

Return || Next Part (Essay)

Alternate Reading Sequences

This chapter presents alternate ways (sequences) for reading this anthology. Or you can skip directly to the story which happens to be first.

Remember: there is no right or wrong way to read the stories in this book. This section contains additional information about the erotic stories to help you decide which stories you might want to skip or read first.

One sentence summaries

The Deal A man and woman talk. They make a deal. The adventure begins.

The Porn Star and the Choir Boy A college student's real-life encounter with a porn star causes his erotic imagination to go wild.

Germs A girl studies abroad in Heidelberg and two college students discover passion at the wrong time.

Miniature Golf Quick comic tale of two horny high school teens talking endlessly about sex. "Besides philosophy, John and Jeffrey talked about sex. And girls. Sex, girls, the same thing."

A Marriage Counselor Reminisces About the Future *"The woman I love is not the woman in my arms."* Why does a man desire a woman he does not love? Such a simple question, such a metaphysical dilemma.

Teenage Girl Masturbating – Multiorgasmic A video of a teenage girl's masturbation becomes an Internet sensation ... and also an enigma.

Elementary School Amore Not erotic in the conventional sense, this story asks what life was like before sexual desire. *"Jaded adults may scoff, but affections in elementary school are no less intense than later passions."*

The Immaterial Woman A college girl seduces her boyfriend by playing a game with unusual rules.

The Kinkiest Thing You Can Imagine Has visiting a convenience store ever inspired your erotic imagination?

The Good Pussy, the Bad Short Story A woman shows her husband an erotica story she wrote; how will he react?

The Reluctant Lover (for Male Readers) A bold sexual proposition creates uncertainty ... and excitement. (Also: **The Reluctant Lover (for Female Readers)**

Was the Door Locked? A visit to a newlywed couple's apartment provides hints of sensual escapes.

The Revolting Breast A man lusts after a beautiful woman. Years later, he meets her again, determined to sleep with her. Is it too late?

Yes, I'm Beautiful Too An airline stewardess disrobes and dreams. An ex-stripper meditates on desire and beauty.

Negotiating Tactics Lawyers in love argue about consent and perversity.

September 27 7:00-8:00 PM EST A young man's erotic letter to a married woman invites her to partake of forbidden dreams.

The Ice Cube A young man has titillating dreams of bikinis, beautiful sweaty limbs and ice cubes.

The First Time, the Last Time 11 Episodes of Lust and Disillusionment.

Volume 1 Stories by Theme

Some stories belong to multiple categories. More categories will be added for later volumes.

- **Most Explicit (generally for actions, but sometimes for speech)**: Miniature Golf ** Teenage Girl Masturbating – Multiorgasmic ** The Immaterial Woman ** The Kinkiest Thing You can Imagine ** The Good Pussy, the Bad Short Story ** The Revolting Breast ** The Ice Cube **
- **Teenagers/Students**: Germs ** Miniature Golf ** Elementary School Amore ** The Immaterial Woman ** The Ice Cube
- **Memoir/Confessional**: The Porn Star and the Choir Boy ** Elementary School Amore ** September 27 7:00-8:00 PM EST
- **Boinking Couples**: The Immaterial Woman ** The Good Pussy, the Bad Short Story ** The Reluctant Lover ** Was the Door Locked? ** Negotiating Tactics ** The First Time, the Last Time
- **Meditations/Dreams**: The Porn Star and the Choir Boy ** A Marriage Counselour Reminisces about the Future ** The Reluctant Lover ** Was the Door Locked? ** September 27 7:00-8:00 PM EST
- **Comic/Light Hearted**: The Porn Star and the Choir Boy ** Miniature Golf ** The Kinkiest Thing You can Imagine ** The First Time, the Last Time
- **Dramatic/Psychological** : Germs ** The Immaterial Woman ** Yes, I'm Beautiful Too ** Revolting Breast ** The First Time, the

Last Time **

- **Promiscuous**: Teenage Girl Masturbating – Multiorgasmic ** The First Time, the Last Time
- **Restless Imagination**: Miniature Golf ** Teenage Girl Masturbating – Multiorgasmic ** The Kinkiest Thing You can Imagine ** The Reluctant Lover ** The First Time, the Last Time
- **Flash Fiction**: The Porn Star and the Choir Boy ** Ice Cube ** The First Time, the Last Time
- **Porn/Sex Work**: The Porn Star and the Choir Boy ** Teenage Girl Masturbating – Multiorgasmic ** Yes, I'm Beautiful Too
- **Guilt/Taboo/Secrets**: Immaterial Woman ** Was the Door Locked? ** September 27 7:00-8:00 PM EST ** The First Time, the Last Time **
- **Sex that Hurts/Sex that Heals** : Immaterial Woman ** September 27 7:00-8:00 PM EST ** The First Time, the Last Time

Sneak Preview of Volume 2

Click here to read story descriptions of the stories appearing in *Existential Smut Volume 2* .

Erotic Interludes

Generally you should read the story before you read the interludes.

(Untitled) Lisa and the narrator argue about story frames. "Did we really worry that Scheherazade might lose her head?"

Especially When Lisa has second thoughts about the deal. The narrator reassures her. Or does he?

If it's not important ... Why? Lisa asks, "Why write erotica when people are dying in the Middle East?" The narrator tries to answer, but stumbles.

One Lesson Lisa and the narrator share contradictory views on the erotic life of a college student.

Alexander Portnoy vs. Carrie Bradshaw The narrator and Lisa discuss the male and female versions of sex-obsessed protagonists. Is Carrie Bradshaw the female Portnoy?

Behavioral Adaptations in the Chapada A young entomologist in Brazil writes a letter to her boyfriend back home about the vagaries of the human heart.

30 Love Lisa and the narrator debate the sexiness of chasing balls.

The Magic Created Lisa disparages the appeal of the one night stand … while admitting to having succumbed to its allure.

The Problem with Mental Fucking Do erotica stories really need a plot too? "Don't confuse sexual tension with dramatic tension," Lisa warns.

Age Differences In erotic fiction, how old should the characters be? Lisa and the narrator disagree.

Confessions and their Dangers Lisa and the narrator debate the value of passionate confessions. "They are a sign of weakness," she says.

Sexy Impersonations Are male writers or female writers better at writing stories with sexy females? Lisa and the narrator disagree.

Safe Words Lisa and the narrator debate whether sexual submission is really a turnon. "Isn't it sexier to have two people actively participating?" Lisa asks.

Backup Dreams Should you avoid dating someone who writes erotic stories? Aren't they too cynical about matters of the heart?

Commentary

People who read stories on erotic fiction sites browse by the story type most likely to stimulate desire or arousal for them specifically. For example, a reader might seek out – or specifically avoid – gay erotica. Or a person may find stories depicting people of certain ethnic backgrounds or physical characteristics to be particularly desirable or repulsive. Some stories are written from the male perspective, some are from the female perspective and some are unclear or ambiguous. Some readers like to read about taboo (or even interspecies) sexual subjects while others may seek more socially acceptable (and definitely human) subjects. Some may prefer lurid and explicit stories, while others prefer stories that are more suggestive and softcore. Some like poetic and metaphorical pieces, while others prefer stories with predictable couplings told in stark language. Some like stories about unrequited desire, while others like simple mechanical descriptions of sex acts. Stories with sexual violence, coercion or victimization may be "triggering" to some audiences while "exciting" or even "healing" to others. Some enjoy reading far-fetched fantasies, while others want erotic stories to be as realistic as possible. A story can have almost no literary value and still be fun or titillating to read. Conversely, a story that is beautiful or profound can contain little titillation value. Often what thrills readers of one gender might seem like unreadable trash to another. No single story can be everything to everybody.

A gap usually exists between what erotic stories an individual believes

he or she will enjoy and what a person actually enjoys. A reader might wish to avoid certain erotic subjects in fiction but then may end up liking a story containing precisely that. I read a lot of erotica anthologies and confess that I end up disliking about 50-70% of the stories – some for literary reasons, and some because the erotica sensibility found in a story seems strange, offensive or –- god forbid! – monotonous. Some stories take me to areas I never would want to go. Although I can appreciate the chance to visit different erotic realms through fiction; sometimes I resent it. The cool thing about reading erotic fiction is that you can explore a lot more kinds of sexual experiences than a person could normally do in a lifetime (and never have to worry about getting pregnant or a sexually transmitted disease). But you can also ignore the strange and unfamiliar and instead find enjoyment and titillation through the ordinary. For example a gay woman can decide to read only lesbian erotica and never have to encounter a cock (or even a man) in a work of fiction for the rest of her life. An adult man can decide to read only erotica about cheerleaders and be all the merrier for having done so (although at some point he may have to confront the fact that the real world involves mostly women in a non-cheerleading capacity).

(Note to self: Write a story about cheerleaders for volume 4!?)

About this project

This book is a collection of stories told by a 25 year old male to his female friend. The order in which you read them is not important; feel free to skip around.

After most of the stories are brief dialogues between Lisa and the main character about the previous story. These "erotic interludes" are philosophical in nature and can be read separately or skipped altogether. (They are short though).

In one interlude (which will appear in *Existential Smut 2*) Lisa is challenged to write her own erotic story. Then I thought, maybe I should include actual stories by female authors? I contacted a few accomplished female authors and plan to publish their contributions in *Existential Smut 3*). I wrote all the stories in *Existential Smut 1* and *Existential Smut 2*, but Volumes 3 and beyond will contain mostly contributions by other authors (of any gender). If you have a story you think might be good for a later volume, check the Submissions page at **ripemangotaketwo.com** to learn more.

The stories in Volume 1 and 2 cover a wide range of erotic experiences; The goal is both titillation and reflection. Each story was written at a different point of my life; some will please more than others. The first two volumes provide a snapshot of one man's erotic imagination over a 20 year period. Is it typical? Who knows! Everyone has interesting and compelling erotic experiences and fantasies; but very few people have taken the time to write them down. Maybe reading this work will help you to understand why your own sexual fantasies are so compelling – whether they are satisfying or frustrating. I am no mind-reader, but I understand that people read erotica not to learn about my fantasies but to have a deeper understanding of their own.

For those who think they know the identity of Hapax Legomenon and suppose that the author and his characters are one and the same, I confidently assert that they are wrong. For those who think they know the real-life people or real-life events that inspired the episodes here, let me just say that the truth is not what you suspect; the inspirations have less to do with people or events but a certain feeling, a certain moment, a certain amount of idle time spent wondering about the alternate world we call

Pornotopia. Truthfully, we humans are so adept at hiding and disguising our fantasy lives that Martian tourists might believe us incapable of it. And if I for a moment believed that anyone could crack the code of these stories to reveal my erotic secrets, I would spend hours changing details to disguise coincidental similarities. Trust me, I'm that paranoid.

Some after glancing over these notions, might wonder, "Well, where is all the sex? Doesn't an erotic story need to have a certain minimum number of sex scenes to be considered an erotic story?" Perhaps I am guilty as charged. Call it puritanism or simply the wish to contemplate without necessarily consummating. Perhaps sexual congress, in all its sweaty glory, is just too hard to depict without self-deception, or to successful effect; or that the fantasizing process desecrates the occasional erotic interludes that real life bestows upon us. The authors most willing to strip the erotic act of holy significance don't peddle dreams; they peddle the frivolity of our illusions; they aim not for release but consolation.

Essays, Poems, Etc. I wrote *Pleasure Manifesto* in 1994, and it felt like it belonged with the story collection. Then, a female author gave me a story and some excellent erotic poetry (which will appear in Volume 3), and I thought, these would also make fine additions. Then I thought, another essay I just finished should go in this ebook. As I assemble more pieces by myself and others, I'm sure I'll discover several more uncategorizable pieces; no doubt Volume 26 will include a 3-D musical animation of beautiful Asian women performing crazy sex acts while riding on the saddles of flying Pegasuses.

About the title: When it was first published online, this project was originally called *99 Erotic Notions* and indeed, two of the stories still reference it, but I changed the title because 1)I didn't want to have to commit to writing 99 pieces! and 2)I thought "notions" were a limiting way to think of these stories.

Project History

In the early 1990s when I was in my 20s I wanted to write short pieces with erotic themes from a male point of view. I wanted them to be both poetic and titillating while exploring the erotic imagination from different angles. I wanted to self-publish and perhaps share it digitally. But the Internet was still very young, and I worked abroad for several years, so I didn't have time to publish anything online. By 2003 I started publishing stories on an X-rated story site (ASSTR) which probably was the raciest site at the time (with multiple kinds of stories guaranteed to offend even the

most open-minded). Comparatively speaking, this story collection was fairly tame – so much that readers would regularly write me to ask, "where is the rest of the story?" or to tell me I had forgotten to include the sex scene. Between 2003-2010 my story site received a few million visitors, and I received a steady supply of comments and encouragement from (mostly male & horny) readers.

As I continued writing, my overall attitude towards the project changed.

First, the story frame became more interesting to me. I wanted to have a story frame consisting of dialogue between a male storyteller and a female reader-critic (a sort of flipping of *Scheherazade*). Originally, the story frame was supposed to be simple and maybe one paragraph between stories. I had written #1 (The Deal) in 1998 as a gentle introduction to the book's premise. Then in early 2005, I came across the Japanese concept of **Atogaki**, a postscript to a manga story which contains the author's self-criticism. Every time I wrote a story, a contrarian voice usually emerged in my head. Partly it was designeritis (the reduced ability of artistic types to enjoy artistic works because of their familiarity with the mechanics of creativity). But as a story writes itself, logical inconsistencies become obvious. A story's premise begins to seem forced or absurd. Characters seem too beautiful or athletic or intellectual. Behavior seems too fantastic or foolhardy or malleable. The reader tolerates these imperfections for the sake of enjoyment, but later, the weaknesses of a story seem more important to talk about than the strengths. This mirrors the struggle between the restless and amorous erotic male imagination and the skeptical and often puritanical stance of the female reader. I never wrote any story with the intent to add an erotic interlude later. But after I've lived with the story for a few years, I begin to hear a dialogue about whether the reality of the story comes anywhere close to the reality of – well, real life. In a way, the book's main struggle between the narrator and Lisa reflects the struggle between the restless imagination and the skeptical – and perhaps puritanical – impulse to civilize or even squash it.

As the decades pass, it became clear to me that the erotic self casts long shadows over people's lives. And I was just a single middle-aged man blind to certain realities: victimization, exploitation, childbirth, long-term relationships, gender fluidity, living honestly and adapting to social mores. Erotic desire wasn't just about having a healthy fantasy life; it was about caring; it was about sharing; it was about giving; it was about perceiving what makes people so interesting and special besides just having a great figure, a sexy laugh or athletic prowess in the bedroom.

Third, sexuality was evolving with technology. In the middle of 20th century, dirty books and magazines were becoming widespread in the U.S. even if they created scandals. By century's end, pornographic videos were more readily available (the offline kind – videocassettes and DVDs), and so was AIDS. By the 21st century, the Internet enabled many new kinds of sexual expression (and exploitation); teenagers were discovering new ways to flirt with friends and strangers. Young women were discovering more ways to profit from quasi-sex work while older (and wealthier) people were happily paying for it. People used the Internet to learn about all new kinds of sub-communities celebrating niche fetishes and new ways to look at gender. Playing video games and inhabiting virtual worlds became a way to interact with other people (and to fake one's identity – not to mention, physical appearance). Who knows what will have changed by the time you read this paragraph!

Censored! It seems surreal to report that as of March 2023, *Existential Smut 1* has been blocked (censored) by the world's largest ebook store and also the second largest ebook distributor in the U.S.A. This really caught me offguard. (I provide a lot more detail in my online essay "How to Be Offensive" at **ripemangotaketwo.com** website.) This has created practical difficulties for me and this project. It is now substantially more difficult (and expensive) to promote or advertise the ebook. If you are a fan of this ebook and have a way to spread the word about it, I'd appreciate anything you can do.

Having the ebook blocked has made it more difficult to sell online. I remain grateful for the online booksellers who have been willing to sell the ebook without hassles. I always intended to keep the cost of these ebooks fairly modest, but now the **Ripe Mango Take Two Press** website allows visitors to download the ebook(s) for free. The download page also includes a DONATE button if you'd like to support the project in a more tangible way.

Story Notes for Volume 1

The Porn Star & the Choir Boy. This story/anecdote about the porn star is 100% true, and I'll even give the actress's name: Gloria Leonard. She was a great and controversial speaker who also edited a raunchy porn mag. At the time the Reagan Administration peddled lots of nonsense about the social harms of pornography, so Leonard had to stand up to it in a sex-positive way. At the time it had never occurred to me that porn also provided an outlet for strong women proud of their work. Of course, this

was only one example of a woman who found success and liberation in the sex industry, but it was still compelling.

Germs. I must have rewritten the last paragraph of that story over a hundred times (starting when I originally wrote the story while living in East Europe in May 1998).

Whenever I read stories, I usually re-read the first paragraph immediately after finishing the last paragraph. This story's first paragraph seems innocuous at first reading, but it has a different emotional impact upon rereading.

At college I never had the chance to study abroad, but many of my friends (and almost all my female friends) did. I was jealous and wistful. So I corresponded with all of them about their European adventures…so much so that I almost felt that I had traveled abroad myself. I had experienced it vicariously. I even briefly edited a little school magazine specifically to students going abroad.

The quotation from *Baby It's You* is my homage to the incredible 1983 movie by John Sayles. I discovered it several years after writing this story, but it captured the hormones and heartbreaks of young love. My use of the name Lianna in *The Revolting Breast* is also a reference to John Sayles' gorgeous film, *Lianna*.

Teenage Girl Masturbating – Multiorgasmic. This story was purely a work of my imagination. But there is a great "artistic masturbation" website called **www.beautifulagony.com**. Many of the vids provided a kind of inspiration for this story. I dream about them often. Another story which inspired this one was the brilliant multimedia story, *Intangible Method*, by Scotto Moore. I liked the idea of the Internet fairy tale which seems to be narrated by an anonymous chorus.

It's a literary gimmick and I don't get to do it often, but I have always enjoyed writing stories where the last sentence – and even the last word – can completely transform what the story is about.

Elementary Amore. After writing this story, I spent several years trying to locate T.L. without success. After Facebook came around, I tried every variation of the name and came across her profile. There was even a small picture of her with husband and kids. I struggled with whether I should contact her; while some people don't mind being contacted by people from their distant past, others may find it offputting (especially if one of the parties is married and the other is not). Some people might regard these kinds of nostalgic reunions with a lack of enthusiasm and sometimes even dread.

As luck would have it, I ran into some old childhood friends, so I

mentioned this childhood crush; we had a good laugh; that gave me enough courage to write T.L. a short sentimental note on Facebook. She never wrote back, but Facebook shows the message as "read."

The Immaterial Woman. A friend of mine suggested that I write an erotic story about an angel lover and a woman named Luce. The movie *Grease* was part of my culture when growing up, but I never actually watched it until decades later. It has universal qualities and struck me as the kind of musical which all high school actors would be acquainted with. One thing I like about the narrative is how naturally it transitions from flashback to present. It creates the illusion that the entire story is taking place in the bedroom.

The Good Pussy, The Bad Short Story. I wrote this story partly after realizing that I hadn't written a story about a normal married couple. If my future wife ever reads this story (and this note), please pay special attention to the last two lines!

Marriage Counselor Reminisces about the Future. Remarkably, this story (and one other) were almost lost for good. I wrote both stories in a war-torn European country; when the fighting started, I had to leave my manuscripts behind. Fortunately through the persistence and patience of an intermediary, the stories were retrieved and sent back to my home in the U.S.

Behavior Adaptations in the Chapada. I was delighted to discover Ovid's *Heroides*, which is precisely the kind of revisionist storytelling that the Lisa character does. The phrase "cold lonely summers" (and the song it came from) has rattled around my heart for decades.

The Revolting Breast. This is the first story where I actually had to map out an elaborate timeline; I needed to make sure all the dates worked out and seemed realistic. The first line that came to me was the last line "Fuck me! Godammit it just fuck me!" Actually it was originally "Fuck me! Fuck me! Goddamit just fuck me!" The extra fuck seemed too porno for this story and removing it was the final edit I made (after going back and forth several times).

"When I was 7 years old, I wanted to be an astronaut; now that I am 42 all I want is to be 7 again." I actually took this line from an anonymous postcard posted on the postsecrets.com website.

I wrote this shortly after three female friends were diagnosed with breast cancer. It was shocking to me because it seemed to change their whole focus; they were all in their late 30s and early 40s and beautiful woman; it made me reflect on the nature of beauty and the timelessness of erotic desire. The story idea came to me when I attended a workshop run

by a young attractive woman who mentioned in passing that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

One hard part about the story was simply getting accurate information about the nature of the disease and how it affected woman in the early stages. I felt uncomfortable asking my friends for this kind of information, so I posted a polite request for information on a well-known breast cancer forum and made no secret about the fact that I was a male erotic story writer. I tried my best to phrase the request as tactfully as possible, but the response from forum members was swift and harsh. Not only was my account disabled, the post was removed, and I was banned off the board without notice. Several people at the forum expressed utter dismay that a male erotica writer would make such a request. Their intolerance was unbelievable; one person called for my castration, the forum posters described me as evil or criminal; another called me a "complete pig" and "scum." Their responses were more rude and insulting than any I had ever seen expressed anywhere on the Internet. More than one woman threatened to call the police to have me arrested.

I realized then that I had touched upon a taboo subject. It was common for the media to portray breast cancer survivors as heroic-but-suffering victims, but here I saw firsthand the emotional scars; I saw the anger and resentment at a disease for demolishing a person's sexual identity. I also guessed that several of these woman were irrational and almost diseased in spirit. I could not see into their motives, but I sensed there was a lot of hurt and a pain at having to bury so much on the altar of this disease.

I saw that cancer had the potential to bring people closer, but for the woman in the story; it seemed like an inconsolable burden; it brought a kind of spiritual isolation; after writing the story, I have to wonder whether Lianna seemed a little too irrational and emotional, but the reactions on the breast cancer forum convinced me that the disease made drastic changes to people's emotional states.

Negotiating Tactics. I just want to say that the argument between "Vinny" Gambini and Mona Lisa Vito about the dripping faucet in the film *My Cousin Vinny* made me realize how sexy it can be when couples in love argue.

Ice Cube. This early story was one of the hardest to write. I had to compress the action into 2 paragraphs and "eroticize" each sentence so it dripped with sensuality without the style seeming too artificial or compressed. It will probably come as no surprise that I once worked at a local swimming pool to handle registrations. 95% of the job involved sitting in a chair, watching the teenage girls sun themselves and dive periodically

into the water.

The First Time, The Last Time. The thing I like about this piece is how easy it was to write them as third person. I liked the premise of these stories and years later was even tempted to write a dozen more. Eventually I decided that the original number of stories in the cycle (eleven) was sufficient, and I liked the fact that I wrote them all at almost the same time. So I left it alone. But if any reader wants to write and submit a different series of *First Time, Last Time* vignettes for a later volume, I'd certainly be interested in reading them.

Backup Dreams. I really haven't decided whether this will really be the last story of the collection (I may change my mind). But I think the Harold Lloyd reference in the epigraph quotation is delicious.

Ask a Question or Make a Comment.Send to **hapaxlegomenon@fastmailbox.net** (or find the latest contact information on the website). Occasionally I share comments or questions by readers on the book's website, but I never identify the commenter's name (It will run anonymously or with your initials.) If you'd prefer that your comment remain private, just include the phrase "Private – not to be published" in your message. Thanks.

Sneak Preview -- Volume 2 (Shameful Attractions)

Existential Smut 2 (Shameful Attractions) will be published a year after Existential Smut 1. From time to time ebook distributors change their rules about the kinds of erotic stories they allow to be sold. It's not always certain that your normal distributor will carry the full unexpurgated ebook. For this reason, you should check the anthology's website **www.ripemangotaketwo.com** website for the latest information about how and where to buy future volumes. (Also the website should have additional fun stuff.)

Volume 2 Story Summaries

The High Rise A voyeur describes how he watched a woman across the street while she takes a shower. Should he try to meet her?

Psyche's Revenge A man has the opportunity for sex with a mysterious woman in a hotel room. There is a catch: he can never see what she looks like!

Notable Non-seductions A middle-aged man remembers 5 beautiful girls he almost seduced.

Inside the Nun's Dormitory. A young man's imagination goes wild about what goes on inside a dormitory for nuns.

Coming Attractions A trailer for a porn movie parodies a well-known story for children.

The Statue A man at a party with three female friends takes a folk remedy for sexual happiness. The result is not what he expects ...

The Telephone Call A random telephone call reawakens a lusty dream about a beautiful (and unapproachable) girl from high school.

Supersex 3000 Comic look at sex in the future and how "in this age of virtual fucking, it is still possible to fall in love."

Gift for a Spanish Beauty A beautiful woman is brought to a Barcelona hotel and handed a key. When she uses the key to open a hotel door, she unlocks an erotic secret ... or three!

Half-Lust You're not sure if you feel love or even lust for this woman; should you fuck her?

Eros is a Dark Circle An aging photographer becomes philosophical about the pornographic photos he prints for a dirty magazine.

The Woman who Tapped Her Shoe A sexy woman appears in the most unexpected places … in a church for instance. A man imagines a seduction.

Festival Fucking A husband and wife pick imaginary lovers at an outdoor festival. The husband admits to lusting after college girls. The wife is horrified.

Initiations A brainy student and her boyfriend go to a birthday party and learn a lot about the sex lives of their friends.

Important Questions about Erotica This essay ponders fundamental questions about erotica and art.

Notes on *Cafe Flesh* A critical essay about Rinse Dream's 1982 avante-garde porn film.

Volume 2 Erotic Interludes

As usual, volume 2 includes lots of story commentaries in the form of a dialogue between the narrator and Lisa.

Lusty Bibliophile Book Reports

A month before publication date of *Existential Smut 1*, I confess to having thought very little about how to promote the damn thing. Complicating everything is my desire to stay behind a pseudonym, making it hard to do interviews, book tours, etc. Starting in **late 2026**, I will post occasional book reports about erotic fiction. I will post a book report every 3 months for the next 10 years. These book reports won't be too analytical or critical, just short breezy reports about sexy books old and new which I have been enjoying.

Check the **ripemangotaketwo.com** website for how to be informed about the latest book reports. I hesitate to promote a series of writings that doesn't yet exist. But almost 20 years ago (July 14, 2003 to be exact), I did essentially the same thing when I uploaded my first story to the Internet. Stay tuned!

I have also started blogging about topics related to sex, art and culture. By the end of 2026 I hope to create on the **ripemangotaketwo.com** website an **Annual Lusty Bibliophile Book List**. This will be an annotated list of interesting and/or notable books of sexually explicit fiction or nonfiction books about sex written during a particular year (starting with the year 2024). If you want ideas about sexy things to read, check it out. (By the way, if you know of an ebook which you think deserves to belong on this annual list, feel free to drop me a line using the website's contact form.)

Happy reading …

Hapax

Get More Cool Stuff

The *Existential Smut* series is published by **Ripe Mango Take Two Press**, an imprint of adult-only fiction titles from Personville Press. (Visit **www.ripemango taketwo.com** website for the latest information about how and where to buy future volumes.)

- **Existential Smut 1: Youthful Indiscretions** (Spring 2023) is an anthology of artsy erotica. Edited by erotica author Hapax Legomenon.
- **Existential Smut 2: Shameful Attractions** will be released in December, 2024. Edited by erotica author Hapax Legomenon.
- **Existential Smut 3** is still being planned. Contact the publisher's website for information about how to submit fiction/poetry/art for this volume.

New Personville Press Titles

My Heart, for Hostage (October, 2022). This tender love story between a young American lieutenant and a French girl in Paris after the first World War was published by poet (and Pulitzer Prize winner) Robert Hillyer in 1942. Out of print for several decades, this novel will be re-released for the first time as a low-cost ebook. A *New York Times* critic called it a "superbly written book, written perhaps as only a poet with and expert in the discipline of verse could write it."

Minor Sketches and Reveries (November, 2020) is a debut story collection by Alberto Balengo. Introspective tales involving animals, allegories and the everyday struggles of life.

Second Death of E.A. Poe and other tales (November, 2021) In contrast to previous story collections (which lean more to the cerebral or poetic), the Matthews stories collected here are down-to-earth yarns: gently satirical and reminiscent of John Cheever's fiction. The title story is about a 19th century Baltimore doctor who has to figure out if the author Edgar Allen Poe faked his own death.

Coming Soon

Boxes of Time (January 2024) consists of realistic stories written by Jack Matthews between 1965 and 1980; they deal with messy emotions, troubled families and damaged personalities.

Pre-Pulitzer Poetry by Robert Hillyer (December 2023) collects poetry and translations by Hillyer before he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1934.

Noncrappy Things from my Blog (Late 2023) is a compilation of essays which originally appeared on the author's blog. Written by Personville Press editor Robert Nagle.

Personville Modern Classics series. Over the next few years this press will be digitalizing several out of print titles in the public domain and re-introducing them for the first time as low-cost or no-cost ebooks. The first two titles released will be by Robert Hillyer.

Ebooks Currently Available by Jack Matthews

Abruptions: 3 Minute Stories to Awaken the Mind. (Summer, 2017). Short prose poems written by Jack Matthews during his last decade of life. These 1 or 2 page fable-like pieces (which often take place in small rural towns) are less concerned with characters than showing how ordinary situations change one's perceptions of the world.

Soldier Boys. (2016) As a result of a lifelong interest in memoirs and personal letters of Civil War soldiers, Matthews wrote a series of philosophical tales about US Civil War soldiers. This is his first collection of short stories to be published in 23 years.

Interview with the Sphinx. (2013) In this provocative & immensely irritating comic play, the Sphinx from ancient Greece is interviewed in modern times as though she were a celebrity pop star. The problem is, she never answers any questions – never directly anyway. Also available as an audio play from most audiobook providers.

Hanger Stout Awake. (1967, 2012). The summer after graduating from high school, an aimless but serious-minded boy messes around at the car shop and discovers he has a quirky talent: the ability to free-hang from a metal bar longer than anybody! This slender first novel was widely praised and was listed by *Antaeus Magazine* as one of the neglected books of the 20th century.

Three Times Time. (2012). This free story sampler contains 3 stories which were previously published in the 1980s. It also contains a long interview with the author about the craft of storytelling. This can be downloaded for free from most ebook stores or directly from the author's home page (ghostlypopulations.com).

A Worker's Writebook. (2011) Matthews distributed a photocopied version of this witty and erudite writing guide to his Ohio U. creative writing students. It offers insight about how successful writers mold raw experiences into a story and how language helps you to do that.

Credits & Acknowledgements

If you'd like to submit fiction or art for a future volume, check the ***www.ripemango taketwo.com*** *website for more details.*

Contributing Authors

Hapax Legomenon (Series Editor)
is the editor behind the *Existential Smut* series and primary author for Volumes 1 and 2. Volumes 3 and 4 (still in the planning stages) will include contributions by multiple authors. In the early 1990s, Hapax began writing a series of erotic meditations and in 2003 started posting the stories on an X-rated story website. He was born in New York and has worked in publishing, education and software development. During the 1990s, he also lived in Eastern Europe. He is unmarried and currently lives in the southern part of the United States. "Hapax Legomenon" is a pseudonym.

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Eugenia Loli designed the cover art for *Existential Smut 1*. Loli is a filmmaker and modern vintage collage artist originally from Greece and now living on the West Coast of USA.

"The Deal"
Raphael and La Fornarina (1813). **Ingres (1780-1867)**, (PD)

"The Porn Star and the Choir Boy"
ISPs (Internet Sex Photos) Pronography, digitally edited to remove the figures. (Approximately

2001). **Jon Haddock (USA), www.whitelead.com**, (CC BY-NC)

"Germs"

Student Prison, (Studentenkarzer), Heidelberg. (approximately 2008). **Photograph by N.C. (USA)**, (CC BY-NC 4.0)

"Miniature Golf"

Fore (1909). **Harrison Fisher, (1875-1934)(USA)**, (PD)

"A Marriage Counselour Reminisces About the Future"

Cupid and Psyche, 1891. **Annie Swynnerton, (1844-1933)(UK)**, (PD)

"Teenage Girl Masturbating – Multiorgasmic"

Półakt kobiecy (1900). **Franciszek Żmurko (1859-1910)(UKR/POL)**, (PD)

"Elementary School Amore"

The Painter's Honeymoon (1864). **Sir Frederic Leighton (1830-1896)(UK)**, (PD)

"Immaterial Woman"

The Fisherman and the Syren (1856-8). **Sir Frederic Leighton (1830-1896)(UK)**, (PD)

"The Kinkiest Thing You Can Imagine"

Absinthe Drinker (1901). **Victor Oliva (1961-1928) (CZ)**, (PD)

"The Good Pussy, the Bad Short Story"

Zuleika (1907). **John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) (USA)**, (PD)

"The Reluctant Lover"

Bacchante (1885). **Witold Pruszkowski (1846-2896) (UKR/POL)**, (PD)

"Was the Door Locked?"

Unidentified Shungu. **Suzuki Harunobu (1724-1770) (JP)**, (PD)

"Revolting Breast"

The Model (1887-1888). **Lord William Merritt Chase(1849-1916) (UK)**, (PD)

"Yes, I'm Beautiful Too"

Orchestra Musicians (1870-1). **Edgar Degas (1834-1917) (FR)**, (PD)

"Negotiating Tactics"

Andrew Semansco and model at work, Bangkok 2007. **Andrew "Sonny" Semansco (USA/JAP)**, Source: Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 2.0)

"September 27, 7:00PM EST"

The Confession (1896). **Frank Dicksee (1853-1928) (UK)**, (PD)

"The Ice Cube"

In the Water (1914). **Eugen von Blaas (1843-1931) (AT)**, (PD)

"The First Time, the Last Time"

Brave Geraint (1860). **Arthur Hughes (1832-1915) (UK)**, (PD)

"The Pleasure Manifesto"

Idyll (Männlicher und weiblicher Halbakt in der Landschaft) (1894). **Ludwig von Hofmann (1861-1945) (DE)**, (PD)

"Erotic Worlds of Marco Vassi"

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"Germs"

Epigraph is last dialogue line from John Sayles' 1983 film *Baby It's You*.

"A Marriage Counselor Reminisces About the Future "

Epigraph comes from *Petrarch: The Canzoniere* by Petrarch (1304-1374). Translated by Mark Musa. Indiana U. Press, 1999.

"The Good Pussy, the Bad Short Story"

Epigraph comes from Verse 46 of *Passion* by Bhatrihari (5th century CE). From *Love Lyrics*, (Clay Sanskrit Library, 45), 2005.

"Essay: Erotic Fiction of Marco Vassi"

The Michael Perkins quotations come from *The Secret Record : Modern Erotic Literature*. Rhinoceros Books: 1992. Chapter XI. "The Metasexual Novel" pp. 235-258.

"Essay: Erotic Fiction of Marco Vassi"

The "fucking quotation" was cited by Ashley Montagu in the book *Anatomy of Swearing*, U. of Penn. Press, 1967 pp. 314-315.

"Essay: Erotic Fiction of Marco Vassi"

Quotation came from *What Wild Ecstasy: Rise and*

Fall of the Sexual Revolution, John Heidenry, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

"Essay: Erotic Fiction of Marco Vassi"
Quotes from these Marco Vassi novels were included in the essay: *The Erotic Comedies* (The Vassi Collection Book 11), *In Touch* (The Vassi Collection Book 7), *The Saline Solution* (The Vassi Collection Book 4) and *The Other Hand Clapping* (The Vassi Collection Book 12). All of these come from the Open Road Media ebook editions (2014 Kindle).

"Essay: Erotic Fiction of Marco Vassi"
Quote about celibacy in Notes section comes from the April 2, 1986 letter in *Shepherd and the Nymph: The Erotic Letters of Marco Vassi and Eve Diana*. Edited by David Sternberg, Red Alder Books, 2020. Ebook.

"Essay: Erotic Fiction of Marco Vassi"
Quote about the contradictions of Vassi's personality by David Steinberg comes from his essay "Marco Vassi: Avatar of Eros," which appears in *This Thing We Call Sex: A Radical Sensible Look at Sex in America* by David Steinberg. Red Alder Book 2015, pp. p97-101.

"Interlude: Backup Dreams "
Epigraph quotes an imaginary book mentioned in the 1924 silent film *Girl Shy* starring Harold Lloyd and directed by Fred C. Newmeyer and Sam Taylor.

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Version 1.0.11 June 29, 2026.

- *Added three words which had been left out of the "Revolting Breast" story.
- *Added a missing period to the first paragraph of "Yes, I'm Beautiful Too."
- *Updated information about the website and the Lusty Bibliophile Book Reports.

Version 1.0.10 August 8, 2025.

- *Corrected very minor typos.
- *Added extra information about the ebook's website.

Version 1.0.9 January 7, 2025.

- *Corrected 3 very minor typos. Also renamed a character in *Teenage Girl Masturbating – Multiorgasmic*. (The original name coincided with a living actor).

Version 1.0.8 December 18, 2024.

- **Improved layout for images. Added 1 image to "Pleasure Manifesto" chapter.

Version 1.0.7 October 7, 2024.

- *Fixed 2 random typos. Made extremely minor adjustments to Volume 2 preview.

Version 1.0.6 May 1, 2024.

- **AA** Made major corrections to the "Marco Vassi: Biography" section of the Vassi essay. Added references to the 2023 interview with David Steinberg.
- **A** Updated dates on the "Lusty Bibliophile" page and provided a link to the "How to Be Offensive" essay (which is about Amazon's decision to block this ebook from its store).
- * Fixed minor punctuation issues and a missing reference in the Credits section. Added two extra words to the *Interlude If it's not important … Why?*
- * Updated book catalog listing.

Version 1.0.5 April 22, 2023.

- **A** Added a long note about Michael Perkins' *Secret Record* to the Vassi essay. Also removed incorrect reference to *Tackling the Team*.
- * Discontinued the A/B version differentiation.

Version 1.0.4ba & 1.0.4b April 8, 2023.

- **A** Changes to the "Erotic Comedies" section of Vassi essay. Added extra spacing to the end of the Vassi essay. Corrected the gender of a pronoun for "Sexy Impersonations" Interlude.

Version 1.0.3a & 1.0.3b March 16, 2023.

- **A** Added "Thank you for reading box" at the end of Vassi essay.
- **Important Note**: Although previous versions were approved by Amazon, when version 1.03.a was submitted, Amazon permanently blocked this title from its ebook store, refusing to provide clarification or answer the publisher's appeal. Details about this action are included in the "How to Be Offensive" essay which Hapax Legomenon posted on the an essay, "How to Be Offensive" which provides more detail about what happened. You can find the essay online at the **Ripe Mango Take Two** website.

Version 1.0.2a & 1.0.2b March 14, 2023.

- **A** Stylistic adjustments to the Vassi essay. Added TOC to Vassi essay. Included one more quote and renamed a heading.

Version 1.0.1a March 12, 2023. Vendor edition provided directly to ebook distributors.

- **AA** Major changes and additions to the Vassi article. Also, added Vassi book cover graphics.
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Version 1.0.0 March 10, 2023. Vendor edition provided directly to ebook distributors.

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0.0.0 (Webfiction). Earlier versions of these stories were published on ripemangotake.com with the title *99 Erotic Notions*. They were removed from the website in 2021.

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